

REIMAGINING BEAUTY:
AN INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF BEAUTY AND AESTHETICS FOR THE
SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF CONGREGATIONS

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MATTHEW ZACHARY CAPPS
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To my beloved Laura

You are adorned with beauty.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis-project argues that spiritual practices that integrate beauty and aesthetics are beneficial for spiritual formation in the life of a Protestant evangelical congregation. This study will show the historical precedent for, the theological framework for, and practical examples of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations. The goal of this project is to assess the value of, and argue for the benefit of, integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices of spiritual formation. The primary areas of spiritual formation explored in this project are the practices of preaching, education, worship, and service.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM AND SETTING

The Problem: Beauty as the Ecclesiological Beast

What happened to the category of beauty in the spiritual formation of the church? To argue that the Protestant evangelical church has largely neglected inquiry into beauty or aesthetics as it relates to spiritual formation would not be a stretch. Indeed, some have contended that the church has failed to provide a holistic foundation for understanding beauty or aesthetics at all. One could argue that, for religion in general, questions of aesthetics *per se* have not been widely pursued.¹ As for Christianity in particular, Frank Brown has argued that the Christian tradition has been largely silent, cryptic, or inconclusive on the matter.²

While this accusation may at first seem too broad and sweeping, several notable modern Christian thinkers have chimed in to the discussion on beauty and aesthetics with a similar tone. Dorothy Sayers goes so far as to argue that “. . . we have no Christian [a]esthetic . . . there have been plenty of writers on [a]esthetics who happen to be Christians, but they seldom made any consistent attempt to relate their [a]esthetic to the central Christian dogmas.”³ One of the great modern Catholic thinkers, Hans Urs von Balthasar, has observed that beauty is the most neglected among theological studies and

¹ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1.

² Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 17.

³ Dorothy Sayers, *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1978), 74.

ecclesiological application.⁴ Is it correct to argue that “. . . the beauty of the world is almost absent from the Christian tradition”?⁵ At the very least, the concern in question is monumental enough to give pause.⁶

Seemingly, most of the reflection and writing on the subjects of beauty and aesthetics remain cornered by trained specialists in theology and philosophy, namely in the specialized field of aesthetics.⁷ Further still, even amongst those philosophers, beauty appears to be a shopworn subject as many of them “. . . suggest that beauty is a category we ought to discard altogether.”⁸ Even so, the philosopher Roger Scruton has pointed out: “. . . beauty demands to be noticed.”⁹ A simple statement to be sure, but the implication is of massive importance. This assertion holds forth beauty as a subject of necessary examination. Albert Mohler contributes to the discussion with a deft observation as he states, “There is something intrinsic to humanity that is drawn to beauty.”¹⁰

Indeed, something of an aesthetic desire resides in humans, an appetite that cannot be sated, at least not fully, in the present age. This fact is easily evidenced within humanity, as almost every single part of their daily lives requires an aesthetic choice to be made. Humanity is beset on all sides with the burden of beauty. The value, depth, and prominence of beauty and aesthetics in the framework of every philosophical or religious discipline, especially Christianity, is a point to be made. Moreover, this desire for, and

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Word and Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 162.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Putnam, 1951), 161.

⁶ Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise* (New York: T.&T. Clark, 1991), xv.

⁷ See David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 15.

⁸ R. Albert Mohler, *The Disappearance of God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2009), 49.

⁹ Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), ix.

¹⁰ Mohler, *Disappearance of God*, 47.

recognition of, beauty is something unique to human beings. In fact, the burden of beauty seems to fall upon humanity alone.¹¹ How then should Christians interact with beauty and aesthetics?

Christian systematic theologians seem to neglect the subjects of beauty and aesthetics just as much as do their philosophical counterparts. Indeed, many theological works used to train church leaders have largely neglected inquiry into these truths.¹² One might imagine that beauty would at least be listed within sections exploring the attributes of God in standard Protestant systematic theology texts. However, the topic of beauty and discussions on aesthetics are strangely absent.¹³ A few examples from standard theology texts will suffice to prove the point. First, consider Louis Berkhof, who treats the doctrine of God by making the standard division between communicable and incommunicable attributes.¹⁴

One might expect beauty to be one of the communicable attributes of God; however, for Berkhof this is not the case. The same is true of Millard Erickson, who explores the doctrine of God in four categories: the greatness of God, the goodness of God, God's nearness and distance: immanence and transcendence, and God's Trinitarian oneness. Again, it seems beauty would fall under the first two categories—the greatness of God and the goodness of God, but the topic is strangely nonexistent.¹⁵ While beauty is noticeably absent in the segments covering the doctrine of God, in the final section of

¹¹ Mohler, *Disappearance of God*, 47-48.

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 18.

¹³ One exception would be the reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, who explores beauty and aesthetics in his work *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 2:254, 316.

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 57-81.

¹⁵ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 253. John Frame places the beauty of God under the category of God's goodness.

Erickson's volume, one section dedicated to the aesthetic character of theology, where he states, "There is a beauty to the great compass and interrelatedness of doctrines."¹⁶

Unlike his counterparts, Wayne Grudem includes beauty as one of the communicable attributes of God.¹⁷ Along with perfection, blessedness, and glory, Grudem classifies beauty as a summary attribute. Grudem defines beauty as ". . . that attribute of God whereby he is the sum of all desirable qualities."¹⁸ Grudem rightly includes conduct as a manifestation of beauty, and entreats the reader to live lives that reflect the character of God. However, as Crain argued, ". . . Grudem has considered beauty from a theological standpoint, but has failed to relate beauty to his explication of the doctrines of revelation, Christ, the church and even the cross."¹⁹

Crain's indictment of Grudem seems to apply many of the standard Protestant systematic theology texts used to train pastors. If the author does not explore beauty beyond the doctrine of God, it is unlikely that one will find any further substantial discussion on the subject in other theological categories. Therefore, Balthasar's observation still holds true, even considering the primary texts used to train many pastors in theology. Beauty seems to be the most neglected among theological studies and ecclesiological application.

Undeniably, humans have a sense of beauty and seem to recognize it intuitively when seen. Therefore, the practice of aesthetics is the responsibility of every person, especially those who call themselves Christians. In other words, there is no way to escape

¹⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 1245-46.

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 219-20.

¹⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 219.

¹⁹ T. Chris Crain, "Is Beauty Beyond the Boundary? The Beastly Nature of Evangelical Theology," paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society meeting, Colorado Springs, CO, November 16, 2001.

the aesthetic task in a manner that is distinctively Christian.²⁰ Therefore, beauty and aesthetics are tantamount to a holistic understanding of human experience and knowledge from a Christian perspective. This observation prompted Frank Burch Brown to argue, “. . . doing aesthetics is not so much a theological option as a theological necessity.”²¹ That Brown approaches aesthetics as a verb here is quite clever. In doing so, he effectively demonstrates why it would be necessary to integrate beauty and aesthetics when creating any framework for spiritual formation. Just as with other areas of the human experience, the experience of beauty (i.e. aesthetics) must have a Christian explanation and application.

David Bentley Hart champions this notion vigorously as he declares “. . . beauty is a category indispensable to Christian thought; all that theology says about the triune life of God, the gratuity of creation, the incarnation of the Word, and the salvation of the world makes room for—indeed, depends upon—a thought, a narrative, of the beautiful.”²² In many ways, one’s theological foundation concerning beauty and aesthetics provides the Christian explanation needed and sets the trajectory for the practices related to spiritual formation.²³ Though beauty and the aesthetic experience is part of the human existence, few have explored these realities in relation to spiritual formation from a Christian perspective.

The Setting: Beauty is the Ecclesiological Cinderella

Since theologians have largely neglected inquiry into the topic of beauty as it relates to theology and spiritual formation in the Christian life, it would seem that the

²⁰ Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence, 1980).

²¹ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 37.

²² Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 16.

²³ It is widely held that “all Christians are theologians, but some are more able theologians than others. Every Christian by definition knows God, thinks about God and makes statements about God. . . . Part of being a Christian is that we do theology.” Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 29.

implications of this neglect have flowed into the ecclesiological waters, muddying them substantially. As a result, beauty and aesthetics have largely lost connection with the spiritual formation of the church and need to be restored to their rightful place in the life of Protestant evangelical congregations. The negative outcomes of neglecting beauty, aesthetics, and its use in spiritual formation will become clearer throughout this study. However, for now, it is important to understand these negative outcomes at a higher level.

Protestant evangelical Christians, on the whole, affirm biblically guided practices that seek to integrate the intellect, affections, relationships, and behaviors as part of the holistic spiritual formation process. Seemingly, beauty and aesthetics should be seen as integral to the holistic spiritual formation practices of the church. Throughout this study, the primary corporate practices explored in relation to their contribution to the spiritual formation of the church will be preaching, education, worship, and service. For now, consider the overall negative outcomes of neglecting beauty and aesthetics in these particular spiritual formation practices.

First, preaching can have a powerful influence on how persons imagine and interact with God and the world. Preaching that lacks the proper influence and implementation of the category of beauty can forfeit a holistic understanding of reality needed for believers to respond to God, and faithfully live the Christian life. While preaching certainly holds forth what is true and good, it must be understood that beauty can powerfully disclose or radiate the truth and goodness of that which is being proclaimed. Without beauty, truth tends toward unattractive historical facts, and goodness toward empty morality.

Second, the negative outcome of neglecting beauty and aesthetics in Christian education is undeniable. The goal of Christian education is the transformation of the whole person. The danger of neglecting beauty and aesthetics in Christian education is that it belittles the God of creation and robs humanity of a vast terrain of human

exploration. The church needs to understand that aesthetic experiences can evoke a tangible longing for God. With proper education on the role of beauty and aesthetics within the Christian life, these experiences can be harnessed to direct the Godward spiritual formation of congregants in the church. Moreover, spiritual formation practices have values embedded in them. Therefore, it is important not only to consider the role of aesthetics in teaching, but also teaching aesthetically. In other words, the receptive and active role of beauty and aesthetics in Christian education is significant as one considers a holistic vision of formation.

Third, worship has a powerful effect in capturing the imaginations of its participants. Not only does worship strengthen, deepen, and develop one's understanding of God, but it can also help people understand and respond to the beauty in the world around them. Without a proper understanding of beauty, Christian worshipers can be deeply suspicious of the very things in which beauty finds its initial mediation, the body and the senses. The neglect of beauty in Christian worship can leave many in the church ill-equipped to understand the spiritual trajectory of these aesthetic experiences. Moreover, beauty and aesthetics can be utilized in worship to stir deeply the affections of the participants as they draw their attention toward God.

Last, Christian service, or an aesthetic lifestyle, adorns the Good News of the Gospel by complementing and reinforcing believers' words with good deeds, correspondingly directing praise to God as a result. Without perceiving the beauty of the Christian ethic, the vision of the service of the church can feel cold and uninspiring, a duty rather than a delight. A vision of Christian service as being beautifully adorning and attesting to the Word being proclaimed can further provide a powerful catalyst of sacrifice for others. Based on these general observations, it seems that beauty and aesthetics should be developed as an important element in the conversation for the spiritual formation of the church.

The Thesis

The general agreement among theologians and Christian leaders has been established, namely, that beauty and aesthetics have been neglected in both theology and practice concerning the spiritual formation of the Protestant evangelical congregations. Moreover, it has been argued that the neglect of beauty and aesthetics can have a negative outcome on the holistic spiritual formation of the church. Therefore, the thesis studied is that spiritual practices that integrate beauty and aesthetics are beneficial for spiritual formation in the life of a Protestant evangelical congregation.

This study will show the historical precedent and theological framework for, and practical examples of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations. The goal of this project is to assess the value of, and argue for the benefit of, integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices of spiritual formation. Again, the primary areas of spiritual formation explored in this project are the practices of preaching, education, worship, and service. The question at hand is, why is beauty treated as a beast in the life of the church, and specifically in the spiritual formation practices of the church?

Observations Concerning the Neglect of Beauty and Aesthetics

The neglect of implementing beauty and aesthetics into the practices related to spiritual formation have a plausible explanation from exploring both the theological foundations of church practice and observations about Protestant evangelical culture, in general. Several factors seem to have contributed to the inconsistency of voices that are distinctly Christian contributing to the conversation on beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation. Here are five observations that directly relate to the setting of this inquiry.

First, it would seem that ascetic dualism has had a negative effect on spiritual formation practices. Throughout the history of the church, the tendency has been to create

a polar dichotomy between the spiritual and physical realms. The implication of such a dichotomy for beauty and aesthetics tends to “. . . assign beauty to the desires of the flesh, resulting in far less appreciation of beauty and greater inclination to condemn it.”²⁴ Kuyper argues, “Beauty makes . . . evil even more alluring, becoming the siren that though its lovely sound seeks to lure us into the depths of destruction.”²⁵ Often, this dualism led to an asceticism that sets Christians up to be deeply suspicious of the very things in which beauty finds its initial mediation—the body and the senses.

For many, the association of aesthetic experience with sensory perceptions and bodily delights polluted its powers with an unwelcome worldliness.²⁶ The historical problem of aesthetic dualism still casts a shadow over contemporary believers. This leaves many in the church ill-equipped to understand the spiritual trajectory of aesthetic experiences. Concerning spiritual formation, sensory experience has a powerful role in the formation of a person from a cognitive, affective, and volitional level.²⁷ A vision of beauty and aesthetics, as it relates to spiritual formation, could enable one to discern properly and understand the God-intended purpose for sensory pleasures.²⁸ Because of ascetic dualism, many in the church have neglected the use of beauty and aesthetics for the purpose of spiritual formation.

The second observation is related to the fear of idolatry and its effect on spiritual formation practices. In other words, beauty and aesthetics have been avoided because of

²⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder* (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2011), 123.

²⁵ Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder*, 123.

²⁶ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 3.

²⁷ Evan Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 84-85.

²⁸ The contemplative view of Christian spirituality may be helpful on this point. Contemplation has to do with a loving attentiveness to God, and involves all of our faculties—seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, feeling, and perceiving. Glenn Hinson, “The Contemplative View,” in *Christian Spirituality*, ed. Donald Alexander (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 171-87.

their alluring power. A deep history within Christianity leads to the neglect of beauty, because it has a strong pull that tends to lean toward idolatry. It has been noted that the ancient Hebrews “. . . developed a deep aversion to physical representations which could be interpreted as objects of worship. The prohibition against graven images in Exodus 20:4 was instilled deep into the psyche of the people.”²⁹ Because of their aversion to the potential allure of beauty, the Old Testament people did not leave a legacy of beautiful artifacts comparable to other ancient contemporaries. Another later attempt to protect the church of idolatry can be found in the iconoclasm movement in the sixth and seventh centuries. Iconoclasm represents a movement of “image breakers,” and flowed from Christian bishops who expressed concern that the beauty of Christian icons would inadvertently lead believers into idolatry.³⁰

This notable example provides a glimpse into the long history of suspicion toward beauty and aesthetic experience. Viladesau notes the iconoclast movement was “. . . at least in part a particular manifestation of a more general problem in Christianity.”³¹ For many, beauty—instead of being used as a sign to encourage worship and devotion—has the ever-present reality of idolatry looming in the shadows, resulting in an asceticism that has no use for beauty or aesthetic experience.³² However, idolatry is a problem with the human heart, not with beauty or beautiful things. Moreover, a God-centered vision of beauty displaces idolatry and positions aesthetics as a signpost for worship. Like

²⁹ Francis M. DuBose, *God Who Sends* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983), 88.

³⁰ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 260ff.

³¹ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.

³² Donald Fairbairn has argued that many of the bishops during the iconoclast movement were in favor of icons, while others aligned with the emperor’s political agenda were in favor of icons. Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy Through Western Eyes* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001).

asceticism, the fear of idolatry has caused many in the church to neglect the intentional use of beauty and aesthetics for the purpose of spiritual formation.

Third, the divorce of the transcendentals has negatively affected the spiritual formation practices of the church. Following the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the divorce of transcendental realities separated beauty from the very parameters that provide its holistic meaning, namely, the good and the true. It must be noted that much of the Christian tradition owes nod to philosophers for this transcendental framework.³³ In the Augustinian tradition, this author would contend that the pagan world must be recognized, critiqued, and reinterpreted, and established under the dominion of Christ.

In the conversations of the ancient philosophers and theologians, beauty represented one of the three transcendental realities along with truth and goodness. If something was true, it was also good and beautiful. For something to be good, it also had to be beautiful and true. Simply put, beauty discloses or radiates the truth and goodness of the reality, person, or object being perceived.³⁴ For many of our church forefathers, compartmentalizing these great transcendental realities would, in turn, deconstruct the majesty of the whole. Therefore, separating beauty, truth, and goodness results in distortion and misunderstanding—not only of the true nature of beauty, but also of God himself.³⁵

³³ However, Bavinck was leery of neo-Platonism in Christian thinking. For him, it often over-emphasized the limited nature of all earthly manifestations of the good, true, and beautiful. One of the most predominant theological concerns for Bavinck was the theological fallout of both a too-high and a too-low view of beauty. Herman Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetic,” in *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 255.

³⁴ John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), vii.

³⁵ Stephen Garrett, “Beauty and the Baptists,” paper presented at the Young Scholars in the Baptist Academy Seminar, 2006.

When the transcendentals are compartmentalized, beauty turns toward sentimentality, truth toward unattractive historical facts, and goodness toward empty morality. When the transcendentals are maintained, beauty remains an objective reality that appeals to one's subjective senses. A Christian understanding of beauty runs directly into the wisdom of the age by suggesting that the transcendental realities must be unified.³⁶ Sadly, for theologians, “. . . beauty has been treated as a Cinderella, compared with the attention paid by theologians to her two sisters, truth and goodness.”³⁷ With the separation of the transcendentals, it could be argued that the church has forfeited a holistic understanding of reality. Recapturing a balanced view of the transcendentals aids to a rounded vision for the Christian life, and thus a holistic vision for spiritual formation practices. Without beauty, many of the practices related to spiritual formation could end up being practices of empty morality or mere religious duty.

The fourth area of observation relates to the rise of utilitarianism and its effect on beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation practices. The rise toward utilitarianism in modern life has resulted in little use for beauty and reflective aesthetic experience. The obsession with functionality has belittled anything that is not “. . . directly useful in mastering the physical life.”³⁸ In fact, some deny beauty has any role except as an instrument of service to something perceived to be more important.³⁹

What does one do, in a utilitarian sense, with a sunset at the coast or the sound of Bedřich Smetana's *The Moldau*? From a utilitarian perspective, many of the things in life are of no practical use. However, God has given beauty and aesthetic experience

³⁶ This line is adapted from Mohler, *Disappearance of God*, 50.

³⁷ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 18.

³⁸ Leland Ryken, *Culture in Christian Perspective: A Door to Understanding and Enjoying the Arts*, Critical Concern Book (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), 74.

³⁹ W. David O. Taylor, “The Dangers: What Are the Dangers of Artmaking in the Church?,” in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 153.

independently of personal appetites, desires, or utilitarian purposes. The danger of limiting beauty to its utilitarian value is that it belittles the God of creation and robs humanity of a vast terrain of human exploration.⁴⁰

Because of the church's restriction of beauty, the potential spiritual enrichment from beautiful and aesthetic means has been lost. Hollinger notes,

In pragmatic results oriented cultures we often see aesthetics as superfluous and certainly not related to spirituality . . . in contrast to our quest for results and success, [beauty] has a powerful way of sensitizing us to the simple and natural things of life and a way of refreshing our inward selves. Allowing creativity to flourish and seeking aesthetic sensitivity draw us into a sphere of life and spirituality that a purely rational approach cannot achieve.⁴¹

Again, understanding the relationship between beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation would aid Christians in seeing the purpose and benefit of beauty in everyday life.

Last, the hesitation toward natural theology and general revelation has its effect on spiritual formation practices. Natural theology has a long and conspicuous history within Christianity,⁴² although Alister McGrath notes, "Many Christian writers from various periods in the history of the church, speak of creation as the handiwork of God, comparing it to a work of art which is both beautiful in itself, as well as expressing the personality of its creator."⁴³ However, Barth's shadow over modern theology adds to the suspicion, asserting that revealed theology is somewhat unconnected to natural theology.⁴⁴

In fact, some theologians in the Barthian tradition have all but taken the stance of denial of natural theology and even general revelation as a central and non-negotiable

⁴⁰ Taylor, *For the Beauty Of the Church*, 153-54.

⁴¹ Dennis P. Hollinger, *Head, Heart, and Hands* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005), 134-35.

⁴² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 180-85.

⁴³ Alister McGrath, *Science & Religion* (West Sussex: Blackwell, 1999), 117.

⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T.&T. Clark, 2004), 2/1:651. Also, see the discussion between Karl Barth, and E. Brunner in *Natural Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1947).

position.⁴⁵ However, other theologians would grant that “. . . God has given us objective, valid, rational revelation of himself in nature, history, and human personality.”⁴⁶ Without understanding the benefit of natural revelation, the church loses a sense of the greatness of God and even his love for them expressed in the goodness of creation. General revelation and the natural world can be powerful portals through which humans experience the glory of God. Moreover, personal experiences with the beautiful creation can evoke a tangible longing for God. Additionally, these experiences can be harnessed to direct the spiritual formation practices of the church.

While these five observations give cause for concern, all hope is not lost for the church’s use of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation. Edward Farley aptly notes that “To be a beast, beauty must at least be noticed in order to be feared or refuted.”⁴⁷ The practices that integrate beauty and aesthetics are beneficial for spiritual formation in the life of a Protestant evangelical congregation. As will be argued in subsequent chapters, there is a historical precedent for, a theological framework for, and practical examples of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices that benefit the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations. Before moving forward, defining the terms central to this exploration would be beneficial.

Defining the Terms

Jeremy Begbie writes, “When we learn another language for the first time, we discover more about the world. . . . When an Eskimo gives me a huge range of words for snow, each referring to a different type, my perception of snow is enriched—I see more

⁴⁵ James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (New York: Clarendon, 1993), 3-20.

⁴⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 194.

⁴⁷ Edward Farely, *Faith and Beauty* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), 5-6.

than I saw before.”⁴⁸ A good argument exists here for seeking to understand the terms used to describe beauty and aesthetics. For this reason, it is important to explore the primary subjects of focus in this study, namely, beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation.

What is beauty? Seemingly, beauty has ceased to be an important notion in the church. Therefore, one might think it difficult to find a general consensus on what exactly beauty is. However, from the early Hellenic times to the eighteenth century, a powerful unanimity prevailed concerning the general characteristics of beauty. The great Platonic theory of beauty was given a Christian reformulation in Augustine and Aquinas, among others, stating that “. . . whatever beauty itself is, to experience it is pleasurable.”⁴⁹

Indeed, beauty is first of all an aesthetic quality that labels what one finds lovely, satisfying, and excellent in an object or a person. Specifically for Aquinas, beauty was that which is pleasing at the very apprehension of it. Moreover, according to the great theory of beauty, it is proportion, namely, the harmony of the parts to a whole that constitute what is beautiful. For the ancients, order and harmony of parts were chief components of beauty—unity, balance, and symmetry. However, this conceptual framework does not necessarily allow one to form an analytic or scientific definition.

David Bentley Hart reasons that it is much more profitable to define general thematics of the beautiful and not offer a precise definition. For Hart, defining general characteristics allows one to govern themes by which something is declared beautiful.⁵⁰ Robin Jenson concurs, writing: “To many people the term [beauty], at least at first, refers

⁴⁸ Jeremy Begbie, *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), xi.

⁴⁹ Begbie, *Beholding the Glory*, 17.

⁵⁰ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 17.

only to qualities that make something externally pleasing or lovely to the eye. . . .”⁵¹ To put it another way, “On the subject of beauty, theorists generally agree only on rudimentary points about the term: that it commends on aesthetic grounds, has absolute and comparative forms and so forth. Beyond this, dispute prevails.”⁵²

Perhaps the difficulty with narrowing down a precise definition of beauty can be resolved by understanding the nature and use of language in this discussion. In a short essay titled *The Language of Religion*, C. S. Lewis made a distinction between ordinary, scientific, and poetic language, noting that one cannot treat religious (poetic) statements exactly the same way one might treat scientific statements.⁵³ Lewis argued that scientific and poetic languages are two different forms or projections of ordinary language. Where scientific language is concerned with describing something with a precise qualitative estimate, which can be tested by an instrument, poetic language is concerned with conveying the quality of that which is being observed with imagination and emotion. Beauty prompts a distinct pleasure or a longing, which according to Lewis, can hardly be put into precise scientific words.⁵⁴ What Lewis was describing here was a deep aesthetic experience.

⁵¹ Robin Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 6.

⁵² Edward Craig, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1998), 680.

⁵³ C. S. Lewis, *The Seeing Eye* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 171-88.

⁵⁴ It was the longing from beauty that Lewis often described with the German word *sehnsucht*, which is a German noun translated as longing, craving, or yearning. As Lewis penned in *The Weight of Glory*, “We do not want to merely see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can be hardly put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it in ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.” C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 16-17.

What then is aesthetics?⁵⁵ Eighteenth-century enlightenment philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, in his 1750 tract, “Aesthetica,” coined the term “aesthetics.” The primary concern of this tract was to explore the mode of knowledge concerning the senses. “In Baumgarten’s usage . . . aesthetics is the study dealing with the lower faculties of the mind, imagination and intuition, as well as with their products, art and poetry.”⁵⁶ The term “aesthetics” is derived from its Greek root meaning “perception by the senses,” or more precisely, the general study of sensation or feeling.⁵⁷

“Anyone who has been given an anesthetic at the dentist grasps the existential meaning of the term. The usage of the term aesthetics has also conveyed the idea ‘to see, view, or look at.’”⁵⁸ In one sense, aesthetics is about taste, or forming a criticism of taste, especially pertaining to that which is beautiful.⁵⁹ Therefore, one might argue that the field of aesthetics is primarily occupied with the study of empirical sensation and reflection on beauty.⁶⁰ This explanation is relevant to the topic at-hand, especially if one understands beauty as “an aesthetic quality that names what we find attractive, satisfying and excellent in an object or person.”⁶¹

⁵⁵ In some literature, the term “theological aesthetics” suggests a theology of the arts—an account of the place of the arts in the worship and life of the community of faith. Farely, *Faith and Beauty*, vii.

⁵⁶ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 6.

⁵⁷ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 6-7.

⁵⁸ David K. Naugle, *Philosophy* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2012), 87.

⁵⁹ Larry Woiwode, *Words for Readers and Writers* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2013), 183.

⁶⁰ As Nicolas Wolterstorff notes, “In general it can be said that if in contemplating something for its own sake we get enjoyment out of how it looks or sounds, then we have aesthetic satisfaction.” Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 40.

⁶¹ “Beauty,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 82.

John Navone's description of beauty, which is both descriptive and emotive, captures the essence of an aesthetic experience well: "Beauty is the mystery that enchants and delights; it engenders a sense of joy and peace."⁶² Beauty cannot be simply or precisely defined, for it is something that must be deeply engaged on many levels. One's attraction to and apprehension of beauty has movement beyond itself, a directional pull, drawing one toward itself, and thus it serves as an inspiration and a guide.⁶³ Therefore, mere experience can become understanding as one looks beyond that which is beautiful to see why it is beautiful.⁶⁴

In theological terms, the subjective experience of beauty points beyond itself to the objective beauty that can be found in that object's creator or origin, namely, the God of the universe. Therefore, aesthetic experiences can have a powerful role in directing one's attention to God. Spiritual formation practices that harness these experiences can be beneficial and powerful assets for the Christian life. Following Farely, this writer will refer to aesthetics as "the dimension of human experience, an engagement with and participation in what is intrinsically . . . beautiful."⁶⁵ Simply put, Farley captures both the passive receptive and active formative role of beauty as it is concerned with human experience.

Last, how should one understand spiritual formation? While different traditions of Christian spiritual formation are present, this study will focus specifically on Protestant evangelical spirituality.⁶⁶ Before addressing the practices of spiritual formation, it seems

⁶² Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, ix.

⁶³ Jensen, *Substance of Things Seen*, 7.

⁶⁴ While perception of beauty has to do with the experience of a beautiful object, this does not mean that it is purely subjective. Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 32.

⁶⁵ Farely, *Faith and Beauty*, vii.

⁶⁶ The general categories of Christian spirituality are Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholicism, Progressive Mainline Protestantism, and Protestant Evangelicalism. Within Protestant evangelical spirituality, there are subcategories such as Lutheran, Reformed,

needed to attend to the topic of Christian spirituality in general. Arguably, Peter Adam is correct in his observation that “. . . many evangelical Christians are weary of the word ‘spirituality’, fearing that is far removed from authentic faith and experience.”⁶⁷ However, Bruce Demarest argues that “Christian spirituality represents the affectively experienced reality of faith union with Christ, rooted in the biblically revealed story of the Savior’s life, death, and resurrection. Essential thereto is the Spirit empowered integration of intellect, affections, relationships, and behaviors.”⁶⁸ In other words, Protestant evangelical Christian spirituality is distinct in its strong emphasis on providing biblical parameters for formation. Adam concurs, noting, “. . . the roots of all our theology and spirituality lie in the revelation of God in Christ, articulated by the Spirit in the Bible.”⁶⁹

Therefore, Protestant evangelical Christian spirituality is concerned with the spiritual formation of believers through practices that are rooted in the biblical text. The aim of Christian spirituality is to bring into contact and correlate a set of biblical and theological beliefs with existential experiences and spiritual practices for the formation of the believer. While some fear that spiritual formation is far removed from authentic faith and experience, others would champion biblically guided practices that seek to integrate the intellect, affections, relationships, and behaviors as part of the spiritual formation process. For example, McGrath argues that “Christian spirituality concerns the quest for fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the

Wesleyan, Pentecostal, and Contemplative traditions.

⁶⁷ Peter Adam, *Hearing God’s Words* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 21.

⁶⁸ Bruce Demarest, *Four Views on Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 205.

⁶⁹ Adam, *Hearing God’s Words*, 29.

fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.”⁷⁰

Spiritual Formation Practices

In recent years, James Smith has contributed to the Protestant evangelical world’s understanding of spiritual formation by arguing that human beings are embodied creatures who are formed by spiritual practices. For Smith, it is one’s practices and habits that constitute the hinge of one’s desire, “. . . they are the hinge that ‘turns’ our heart, our love, such that is predisposed to be aimed in certain directions,” namely, toward God.⁷¹ In many ways, spiritual formation is related to the practices of devotion and piety and, thus, virtue formation. For Smith, biblically guided spiritual formation practices shape how persons imagine the world. He writes, “Christian formation is a conversation of the imagination effected by the Spirit, who recruits our most fundamental desires.”⁷² To note what Smith means by imagination is important, since it does not mean fantasy, or even creativity; rather, it refers to a particular way of making sense of the world.⁷³ This observation helps one understand experiences with beauty and aesthetics, in general.

If practices are instrumental in forming spirituality over time, they would be foundational in integrating beauty and aesthetics into the life of the church. From a Protestant Evangelical Christian perspective, it could be argued that the primary corporate practices that contribute to the spiritual formation of the church are preaching, education, worship, and service. This chapter will examine these practices briefly and return to them throughout the course of this study.

⁷⁰ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 15.

⁷¹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 56.

⁷² James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 15.

⁷³ David Smith, “Reading Practices and Christian Pedagogy,” in *Teaching and Christian Practices*, ed. David Smith and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 211-23.

First, one must consider preaching and spiritual formation. Following the father of the Protestant reformation, most evangelicals would argue that the preaching of God's Word is central to the spiritual formation of the church. Luther wrote ". . . to preach Christ means to feed the soul, to make it righteous, to set it free, and to save it, provided it believes in the preaching."⁷⁴ Protestant evangelicalism has often been described as the religion of the Word of God.⁷⁵ One of the most important features of Protestant evangelicalism is the reliance and emphasis on the public proclamation and personal study of the Bible.⁷⁶ Moreover, the fact that power for spiritual change resides in God's Word argues the case for the importance of preaching for spiritual formation.⁷⁷ Over time, hearing the Bible preached will not only encourage, convict, and instruct, but preaching can also yield a powerful influence on how persons imagine and interact with God and the world.⁷⁸ Therefore, in the cases of beauty and aesthetics, an existent powerful correlation needs to be explored further.

Second, one must reflect on the role of education and spiritual formation. Education is not only a universal activity found in all cultures; it is central to the spiritual formation of the church. However, Colossians 1:28 indicates, "Christian education is distinct from other kinds of education in that its goal is the transformation of the whole person."⁷⁹ For Christians, the primary arena in which educational formation takes place is within Christ's body, the fellowship of the church. Packer has pointed out, "The church is

⁷⁴ Martin Luther, *On Christian Liberty*, ed. Harold Grimm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 7.

⁷⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (West Sussex: Blackwell, 1999), 18.

⁷⁶ Ps. 147:15-18; Jer. 23:28-29; Isa. 55:10-11; and Phil. 1:18 (ESV)

⁷⁷ 2 Cor. 4:7; and Heb. 4:12-13

⁷⁸ The implications on preaching to how one imagines and interacts with the world are often neglected in preaching texts and courses.

to be a learning-and-teaching fellowship in which the passing on of what we learn becomes a regular part of the service we render to one another.”⁸⁰ In this sense, aesthetic education is lacking within the church.⁸¹ However, beauty and aesthetics, by virtue of their biblical, theological, and philosophical roots form a vital part of Christian education.⁸² According to Socrates, “The object of education is to teach us what is beautiful.”⁸³ The broad category of Christian education has small-group ministry and discipleship in mind. In both of these practices of the church, biblical education is integral to their purpose.

Third, as habit-formed people, worship practices play a significant role in the spiritual formation of the church. Worship is far more central and significant in Scripture and in the life of the church than many people realize.⁸⁴ In fact, worship could be said to be the defining characteristic of the church.⁸⁵ This may explain why in the Bible Christians are sometimes simply called worshipers.⁸⁶ Worship practices form “. . . us and our communities, giving shape to what we believe.”⁸⁷ Worship gatherings are

⁷⁹ Michael Anthony, *A Theology of Christian Education* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 21.

⁸⁰ J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 15.

⁸¹ Stratford Caldecott has effectively argued that beauty and aesthetics are lacking in liberal education. Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*.

⁸² Steve Halla, “Christianity and the Arts,” in *Faith and Learning*, ed. David Dockery (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 279.

⁸³ Charles Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 17.

⁸⁴ David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1992), 16-20.

⁸⁵ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 42-48.

⁸⁶ Phil. 3:3; 1 Tim. 2:10; Heb. 12:28; and Rev. 13:12-12, 14:11

⁸⁷ Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 94.

environments where the church's identity is formed and refined, because in the practice of worship, imaginations are captured.⁸⁸ Therefore, one's worship expressions can strengthen, deepen, and develop one's understanding of God and the surrounding world.⁸⁹ Consider how "the components of the worship service . . . lead the heart through various stages of awe, humility, assurance, and thanksgiving."⁹⁰ The enjoyment of beauty and aesthetic development can be formed strategically in a congregation by the worship philosophy, worship patterns, and worship elements.

Fourth, spiritual formation is also shaped by one's service. Paul declares that Christians are "fellow workers," called to join God in the building of His kingdom.⁹¹ Christians' mutual service to one another and to the world at large are the nonverbal forms of witness that are Christ-honoring and gilding of the Gospel. Christian service adorns the Good News of the Gospel by complimenting and reinforcing words with good deeds. This is why God has called His people to be a light to the nations.⁹² As Litfin has argued, "Our deeds are constantly working together with our verbal message, rendering it more or less credible."⁹³ As for the relation of service to beauty, it has been said that something is beautiful insofar as it reflects the character, nature, or will of God.⁹⁴ The New Testament makes the connections between the beauty of good deeds and the glory

⁸⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 54.

⁸⁹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 140.

⁹⁰ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 20.

⁹¹ 1 Cor. 3:9

⁹² Isa. 49:6. Michael Goheen has explored this idea comprehensively in *A Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

⁹³ Duane Litfin, *Word vs. Deed* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 131.

⁹⁴ Joseph Wooddell, *The Beauty of the Faith: Using Aesthetics for Christian Apologetics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 47.

of God.⁹⁵ This aesthetic lifestyle seeks to reflect God's will in beautiful acts of service toward others, knowing that a connection exists between seeing good deeds and the corresponding praise given to God as a result.

Conclusion

Once more, the primary thesis of this study is to demonstrate how practices that integrate beauty and aesthetics are beneficial for spiritual formation in the life of a Protestant evangelical congregation. Throughout this study, the research will demonstrate the existence of a historical precedent for, a theological framework for, and practical examples of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices that benefit the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations.

The second chapter of this thesis-project will demonstrate a historical precedent for integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices that benefit the spiritual formation of a congregation. While many modern pastors and theologians have largely neglected the implementation of beauty and aesthetics in the life of congregations for spiritual formation, several of the most influential pastors and theologians in Christian history have given considerable attention to the topic. The four theologians closely examined in the following chapter will be Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards, and Hans Urs Von Balthasar. That these prominent voices have provided several categories and parameters that contribute to the church's understanding of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation will be argued. In other words, their work provides the church with a workable framework within which Christians can understand and appreciate beauty and aesthetics as they are integrated with practices related to spiritual formation.

The third chapter of this thesis-project will explore the theological framework contributing to the church's understanding of beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation. Again, while theologians and church leaders have largely neglected

⁹⁵ Matt. 5:16; and 1 Pet. 2:12

the study of beauty and aesthetics and its implications on the spiritual formation, the Bible is not silent on the concepts of beauty or aesthetics. Therefore, a theological foundation exists for integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations. To demonstrate this, the biblical concepts of beauty and aesthetics will be explored through the categories of systematic theology with a special emphasis on their relationship to spiritual formation, thus demonstrating the theological foundation for integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations.

The final chapters of this thesis-project will be exploratory in nature, based on the arguments of the previous chapters, which have been descriptive in uncovering both reasons why beauty and aesthetics is important in the life of a congregation, and several reasons why beauty and aesthetics have been neglected in congregational life. Through explanatory research, the final chapters will seek to develop a description of a congregation that is aesthetically healthy by utilizing questionnaires conducted with an audit instrument (using a modified *Likert Scale* and open-ended questions) with church leaders to assess their intentional use of beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation of a congregation through particular practices. These questions will center on the ministries of preaching, education, worship, and service.

Moreover, in the final chapters of this thesis-project, a proposal will be set forth concerning several practical ways in which a congregation can improve its use of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation in the areas of preaching, teaching, worship, and service. It is anticipated that the historical precedent for, the theological framework for, and practical examples explored in this thesis-project will illustrate the benefit of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations, thus proving the thesis proposed in chapter 1. It is further anticipated that the research will demonstrate that the neglect of integrating

beauty and aesthetics into spiritual formation practices can have negative implications on the congregation.

CHAPTER 2

A HISTORICAL LITERATURE REVIEW ON BEAUTY, AESTHETICS AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Introduction

This study seeks to validate the claim that integrating beauty and aesthetics into spiritual formation practices, such as preaching, education, worship, and service, can be beneficial for the life of a Protestant evangelical congregation. This thesis-project grows out of the concern that the neglect of integrating beauty and aesthetics into such practices can have negative implications on the spiritual formation of a congregation. Again, the entirety of this thesis-project is organized to demonstrate the historical precedent for, the theological framework for, and practical examples of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of the church. This chapter will specifically explore the historical precedent for integrating beauty and aesthetics into the practices of the church as they are related to spiritual formation.

Several patterns arise as one reviews much of the Christian literature focused on beauty and aesthetics. First, as demonstrated in the first chapter of this thesis-project, many modern pastors and theologians have largely neglected the implementation of beauty and aesthetics in the life of congregations for spiritual formation. As outlined in that chapter, several observations concerning the cultural setting of this discussion seem to have contributed to the neglect of this subject. Garrett has observed that while “. . .

current discussions regarding theological aesthetics and beauty seem to be flourishing; yet the Christian tradition varies from murmur to roar.”¹

The fact that few modern pastors and theologians have explored beauty and aesthetics with a specific aim of their benefits for spiritual formation validates the need for such a study.² While the modern Christian tradition on beauty and aesthetics varies from murmur to roar, notable voices in church history have substantially contributed to the trajectory of the discussion on theological aesthetics, which have implications on their relation to spiritual formation of the church. The second observation is that the majority of the reading related to these topics reveals the repetition of four names, namely, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards, and Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

The early church father and philosopher Augustine was among the avant-garde in approaching the field of aesthetics from a perspective that is distinctly Christian. Indeed, Augustine’s theories on beauty and aesthetics have impacted much of the theological conversation concerning these areas of study. While one of Augustine’s earliest treatises on beauty (*On the Beautiful and Fitting*), has been lost, his major contributions in the field of aesthetics can be found throughout his other writings.³ From his remaining writings, clearly, Augustine’s existential journey of faith was indispensable to developing his ideas on discernment concerning beauty and aesthetics.

Like Augustine before him, the Medieval Italian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas holds fast as a prominent figure in discussions of medieval aesthetics. While Aquinas never neatly organized a discourse on beauty or aesthetics, it could be argued that he did present these topics as a self-contained and coherent component within his larger philosophical system. Aquinas is often quoted in discussions on aesthetics

¹ Stephen Garrett, “Beauty and the Baptists,” Paper presented at the Young Scholars in the Baptist Academy Seminar, 2006, 2.

² Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise* (New York: T&T. Clark, 1991), xv.

³ John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 54.

because of his formal definition of the beautiful, which is “his effort to characterize beauty in its objectivity with reference to its autonomous appearance,” and this begins with the experience of beauty.⁴

Jonathan Edwards is arguably one of the Christian thinkers most highly regarded in the field of theological aesthetics. Beauty is a fundamental theme in Edwards’s understanding of being and genuine religious experience.⁵ Establishing that beauty was a dominant thread woven throughout the complex outworking of Edwards’s theological thought is a simple task. Edwardian scholarship has noted that he “regarded beauty as fundamental to his understanding of God.”⁶

Finally, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar is widely recognized as one of the greatest Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. Balthasar wrote extensively in the field of theological aesthetics. The centerpiece of Balthasar’s theology, his theological trilogy, attempted to resolve that problem: in English, *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-logic*. Some recent German writers have called *The Glory of the Lord* his “Theo-aesthetics.” While that is not the title Balthasar chose, it does capture the aim of this volume in exploring beauty.

As will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, these four thinkers have stewarded considerable influence and work on this topic, and have provided an adequate framework within which Christians can understand and appreciate beauty and aesthetics with an aim for spiritual formation. Therefore, this literature review will be organized topically in order to categorize the primary themes shared by these four influential theologians. In this chapter, the parameters of these four topical themes, namely,

⁴ Andreas Speer, “Thomas Aquinas,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 77.

⁵ Roland André Deattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics*, Jonathan Edwards Classic Studies (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), I.

⁶ Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 93.

theological framework of beauty, the transcendental reality of beauty, the existential reality of beauty, and the proper discernment of beauty will be investigated. These categories will then be applied with an aim to relate them to the spiritual formation of the church.

The Theological Framework of Beauty, Aesthetics, and Spiritual Formation

Central to this entire discussion is the theological framework for understanding beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation. In fact, the transcendental reality of beauty, the existential reality of beauty, and the proper discernment of beauty are all implications of developing a proper theological framework for understanding beauty and aesthetics. From a theological perspective, the foundation of a proper understanding of beauty and aesthetics must be related to the God of beauty. According to Thomas Aquinas, the ways in which beauty provides glimpses of the transcendence of God not only makes one aware of Him, but also prompts aesthetic longings drawing humanity toward Him. Aquinas writes,

Nothing our understanding can conceive of God succeeds in representing him, so that that which is proper to God himself remains hidden to us, and the highest knowledge we can have of him as we live out our journey here on earth lies in recognizing that God is above everything we can think of him.⁷

According to Aquinas, while God remains partially hidden to humanity, He has made humanity capable of encountering Him by His gracious revelation. God's self-communication in creation and his self-revelation in history provide the grounds for endless exploration. Aquinas believed that the restless exploration of beauty and the quiet tranquility of God meet in the experience of His beauty. Commenting on Aquinas's medieval concept of beauty, Bruno Forte maintains that "beauty alone is that place without place where all things are led back to the One. . . . Ultimate draws us beyond all that is penultimate: to travel beauty's path is to be led to walk unfamiliar ways, to know

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* 2. 1. ad 9m.

exile, to savor solitude.”⁸ In other words, beauty is the path that leads one to total exodus of the self and from every possession of self toward God. Like Aquinas, when Augustine traveled this path and finally found God as the true beauty his heart had longed for, he declared;

It was you then, O Lord, who made them. You who are beautiful, for they too are beautiful. You who are good, for they too are good. You who are, for they too are. But they are not beautiful and good as you are beautiful and good. Nor do they have their being as you the Creator have your being. In comparison with you, they have neither beauty nor goodness nor being at all.⁹

For Augustine, not only was God the beauty he had longed for, he also beheld God as the eternal beauty that will never tire because of His ability to affect one’s deepest inner being. Augustine genuinely believed that it is one perceives beauty and recognizes its ultimate source in God by the inner self. It has been argued that for Augustine “. . . to think about God, and about all things in God, was one with thinking about beauty: when this theologian speaks of God, he speaks of beauty, and when he speaks of what is beautiful in this world, he constantly points to the One who is the source and goal of all that is beautiful.”¹⁰ Again, “Augustine came to see that God’s beauty is utterly attractive and, when perceived, totally satisfying.”¹¹

Like Augustine before him, Edwards’s theology was permeated with the beauty of God. In fact, for this great New England pastor, beauty was, in many ways, representative of God. More precisely, it would seem that, in his study of beauty, Edwards found the person of God most intimately. Not only was God beautiful to Edwards, God was beauty itself. For this reason, Edwards’s entire theological vision was fueled by his enchantment with God’s beauty as a reflection of His glory:

⁸ Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 13.

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 231.

¹⁰ Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 2.

¹¹ Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, 54.

It appears that all that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God's works is included in that one phrase, the glory of God. In the creatures' knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fullness is received and returned. Here is both the emanation and remanation. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is of God and in God, and to God, and God is the beginning, middle and end in this affair.¹²

Moreover, Edwards wrote that "God is God, and distinguished from all other beings, exalted above them, chiefly by his divine beauty, which is infinitely diverse from all other beauty."¹³ Again in *The Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards claimed God is "... the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty . . . of whom, and through whom, and to whom is all being and all perfection; and whose being and beauty are, as it were, the sum of comprehension of all existence and excellence."¹⁴ Therefore, God is exalted chiefly as the foundation and fountain of all beauty. Edward Farely goes as far as to argue that, for Edwards, beauty is God's primary attribute.¹⁵ This divine beauty has an attractive and motivational power, thus demonstrating function of beauty for the Christian as sanctifying, which, according to Edwards, was the most significant aspect of humanity's participation in beauty.¹⁶

More precisely, Augustine came to see that God brought divine beauty to humanity manifest in Jesus Christ. In other words, aesthetic satisfaction in God is to be found ultimately in Jesus Christ. Augustine knew well from experience that a deformed vision could allow one to be blinded by sin and darkness, "... so as to become no longer

¹² Jonathan Edwards, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 120.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 298.

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 15.

¹⁵ Edward Farely, *Faith and Beauty* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), 43.

¹⁶ Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 194.

able to discern the beautiful” One.¹⁷ However, he would argue that God is victorious over all secondary beauties and can be known through revelation by making beauty known most fully in the Son. For Augustine “. . . eternal beauty becomes flesh and makes itself perceptible to the sense of our outward selves, so that our inner selves might be touched and captured by the grace which frees and saves us.”¹⁸

Like Augustine, Aquinas argued that that way to beauty begins with contemplation of the Son of God. In the Son, the whole bursts forth, allowing God’s beauty to be most present and perceptible for humanity. Simply put, “Beauty is concerned with what is proper to the Son.”¹⁹ One way to explore Aquinas’s thought on this point is to understand his concepts of form and splendor in relationship to the incarnate Jesus. While Jesus represented the form of the Trinitarian God, expressing a similarity of relationship, Jesus’ splendor represented the eruption of the ultimate into the penultimate.

In other words, the transcendent and eternal God steps into time and space in the form of Jesus Christ, freely displaying His beauty. As Forte argued,

This, then, is the beauty of the Incarnate Son: he is the icon of what is unseen, the Word for which our words offers a faithful echo of the eternal self-communication of the divine Silence. . . . Thus the incarnate Word . . . points us back to the “beyond-ness” of the God with whom he abides in eternity, but at the same time he is that God’s faithful presence, the nearness of the Absent One, the sacrament of the One in whom love has its source, and who is at one and the same time infinitely distant and infinitely near.²⁰

Aquinas maintained that the perfect reflection of the Father’s beauty is seen in Christ.²¹

¹⁷ Forte, *Portal of Beauty*, 9.

¹⁸ Forte, *Portal of Beauty*, 10.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I. q. 39. a. 8c.

²⁰ Forte, *Portal of Beauty*, 17.

²¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, q. 73, a. 1C. Three things must be present for beauty to exist, according to Aquinas, namely, perfection, harmony, and luminosity. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). For Aquinas, perfection in beauty is the form of the whole, which issues from the perfection of the parts. The Son is the perfect representation of the whole in part. As for harmony, Aquinas argued that beauty is found in the fragment, which represents itself in

Like Augustine and Aquinas, Edwards saw Jesus Christ as the perfect image of God's glory, and as manifesting His beauty in a pure manner. God's beauty consists primarily in his moral perfections or holiness. Herein lies the beauty of Jesus Christ,

. . . he is altogether lovely. . . . All the spiritual beauty of his human nature, consisting in his meekness, lowliness, patience, heavenliness, love to God, love to men . . . all is summed up in his holiness. And the beauty of his divine nature, of which the beauty of his human nature is the image and reflection, does primarily consist in his holiness.²²

Essentially, Jesus Christ embodies, as the God man, all that which the Godhead consents as beautiful. In Edwards's theology, Christ was the manifestation of true beauty in the created world. Edwards argued that Jesus Christ ". . . created the world for this very end, to communicate himself in an image of his own excellency."²³ Balthasar developed this theory further, by demonstrating that the study of beauty correlated directly with perceiving and appreciating the glory of God as it was manifested ultimately in Jesus Christ.²⁴

Balthasar's theory of divine beauty was centered on God's love as shown in Jesus Christ. For this reason, Balthasar propped up beauty as essential for a Christian apologetic.²⁵ In fact, the inspiration and starting point for Balthasar's theological aesthetic is found in the beauty constituted by the cross of the eternal Son, the very summit of

relationship with the parts present in the whole. In this way, beauty dwells in the Son, because it is common to the nature of the Trinity. Last, he explored luminosity as the instance when beauty gloriously breaks from the whole, upon us in part. The Son is clothed in the beauty of the whole which shines forth in Jesus' splendor.

²² Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 279.

²³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 279.

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 37.

²⁵ Balthasar argued that one must ". . . look at the whole of Christian theology under the sign of beauty, as showing forth a certain form whose inner radiance is beauty and whose various manifestations are most fully known as expressions and mediations of this original form of beauty and beauty of form." Noel O'Donaghue, *The Analogy of Beauty* (London: T.&T. Clark, 1986), 1.

God's entire work of revelation.²⁶ For him, the beauty of God was most beautifully seen in the cross of Christ.²⁷ Because the luminous form at the center of Balthasar's theology was the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, his aesthetics were essentially Christologically centered. He argued that one "... ought never to speak of God's beauty without reference to the form and manner of appearing which he exhibits in salvation history."²⁸

In other words, beauty is beheld in the event of the self-giving of God making himself manifest in the event of the incarnation of the eternal Son, who is beauty in person.²⁹ Again, "Just as we can never attain to the living God in any way except through his Son become man, but in this Son we can really attain to God in himself."³⁰ Balthasar held that the act of perceiving revelation cannot be separated from the object that is perceived, namely, the enrapturing form of God's beauty as shown in Jesus Christ.³¹ Balthasar adds to this development by pointing out that God journeys from Himself toward His people in Christ, and at the same time, it is possible for the church to journey away from self toward their God through Christ. Put more precisely, the church is drawn into God's glorious beauty in Christ, through which she responds by reflecting that beauty into the dark world.

²⁶ Forte, *Portal of Beauty*, 53.

²⁷ For Balthasar, beauty is the "whole in fragment: in the strongest Christological sense that can be given to this expression: not the Wholly other, separated and alien with respect to the fragment, not the isolated and flawed fragment with respect to the whole, but the absent presence, the present absence, to which the expression points and which only the bright darkness of the cross can in some measure illumine." Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 53.

²⁸ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 124.

²⁹ In philosophical terms, "Beauty itself is amorphous but is known as beauty only when it reveals itself in a formed object." Jeffrey Ames Kay, *Theological Aesthetics* (Frankfurt: Herbert Lang and Peter Lang, 1975), 4.

³⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 124.

³¹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 92-94.

Theologically it could be argued that human acceptance of divine beauty depends on the condition of the beholder's heart.³² For this reason, Edwards labored to demonstrate that only the saving grace of God's Spirit enables man to apprehend divine beauty.³³ First, one comes to see beauty as displayed in Christ's love for the Father in his atoning death.³⁴ Second, only because of Christ's work in the atonement and in the regeneration of the Spirit can one apprehend the primary beauty of God. Therefore, for Edwards, the delights of beauty are emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ, seen only through the work of God's Spirit. God's knowledge and understanding is manifest in the Son, while his love, holiness, and virtue are communicated and experienced through the Holy Spirit.

Concerning the Spirit, Sherry explains Edwards's understanding of the third trinity member's relation to beauty as follows, ". . . the Father created the world with his Son, and that the Holy Spirit, being the harmony, excellence, and beauty of the deity, has the particular function of communicating beauty and harmony to the world."³⁵ Specifically, the source of beauty that proceeds with the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son, and undeniably is beautiful itself. Therefore, the particular role that the Spirit plays within creation is that of communicating the beauty of God to the world.³⁶ In Edwards's words, ". . . the Holy Spirit is the sum of all good . . . the sense of divine

³² "[God's] beauty compels this faith by its ability to reveal itself actively, to show itself in an objective being to a subjective being and to call the subjective being to itself." Kay, *Theological Aesthetics*, 4.

³³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 5 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 50.

³⁴ "He never in any act gave so great a manifestation of love to God, and yet never so manifested his love to those that were enemies to God, as in that act." Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 685.

³⁵ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 12.

³⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *An Unpublished Essay of Edwards on the Trinity*, ed. G. P. Fisher (New York: Charles Scribner Son's, 1903), 97-102.

beauty.”³⁷ Therefore, the mutual consent of the Godhead encapsulates the Trinitarian model of beauty.³⁸

As argued above, the transcendental reality of beauty, the existential reality of beauty, and the proper discernment of beauty are all secondary to the foundational theological framework of beauty. Therefore, a proper theological framework for understanding beauty is essential for the use of beauty and aesthetics in spiritual formation. From a theological perspective, the way beauty provides glimpses of the transcendence of God not only makes one aware of Him, but also prompts one’s aesthetic longings toward Him. Moreover, God’s beauty provides humanity grounds for endless aesthetic exploration and delight.

In other words, God’s beauty has an attractive, motivational, and even sanctifying power. Beauty is the path that leads one to total exodus of the self as one is enraptured in the beauty of God. God is the beauty that humanity has longed for, and in Him humanity finds the eternal beauty of which believers will never tire. Consequently, central to a holistic theological vision is an enchantment with the Trinitarian God’s beauty, which is most clearly seen in the face of Jesus Christ, beauty incarnate. More specifically, as God’s knowledge and understanding is manifest in the Son, his love, holiness, and virtue are experienced in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, only the saving grace of God’s Spirit enables one to apprehend divine beauty, since the Spirit is concerned with communicating the beauty of the Trinitarian God to the world.

The Good News of Christianity is that God journeys from Himself toward His people in Christ, and at the same time, the church can journey away from self toward God through the Spirit. This truth is fundamental to a proper understanding of spiritual

³⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace*, ed. Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1988), 49.

³⁸ Therefore, “Only intelligent and volitional beings could exhibit and express spiritual beauty by giving consent—a term that implied volition, affection, and love—to God’s being and to one another.” McClymond and McDermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 95.

formation. Therefore, in spiritual formation practices, the congregation should be provided with images and analogies that produce impressions comparable to the theological reality being communicated.³⁹ Scottish preacher James Stewart argued that the aim of the preaching should be to “. . . quicken the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.”⁴⁰ This truth is applicable to the practices of education, worship, and service as well.

Appeals to outward experiences as they correspond to theological truth have a powerful impact on inward transformation. Newton argues for heart-deep formation that engages the learner in multidimensional levels, even utilizing beauty and aesthetics for imaginative formation.⁴¹ Additionally, there is a missional aim to enabling the church to experience and imagine the beauty of God through spiritual formation practices. As Harper and Metzger contend, “as the body of Christ, we are the embodiment of the divine life in the world. In view of Christ’s incarnation and his headship, the beauty and beautiful things that emerge from Christ’s church must be incarnational and missional. In other words, the church must embody their faith in the surrounding community, serving as extensions of Christ’s body.”⁴² Therefore, the church not only experiences the beauty of God through spiritual formation practices, such as preaching, education, worship, and service, but they also reflect beauty through these spiritual formation practices to the watching world.

³⁹ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

⁴⁰ James Stewart, *Heralds of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 73.

⁴¹ Gary Newton, *Heart Deep Teaching* (Nashville: B&H, 2012).

⁴² Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 235.

The Transcendental Reality of Beauty, Aesthetics, and Spiritual Formation

It was mentioned in the first chapter that one of the great tragedies of the modern era is the divorce of the transcendentals from their understanding of existence and meaning, particularly as it concerns beauty and aesthetics.⁴³ The study of the relationship between transcendentals and beauty is most notably traced back to Augustine of Hippo. Following Plato, Augustine understood the good, the beautiful, and the true as being essentially reducible to the same thing.⁴⁴ While the good, true, and beautiful are one, they are also three.⁴⁵

Because they are three, when the unity of these transcendentals are discarded or compartmentalized, beauty turns toward sentimentality, truth toward unattractive historical facts, and goodness toward empty morality. Therefore, it would seem a unified vision of the transcendentals is important for a holistic vision of beauty and its place in the spiritual formation of the church. As Augustine argued, things are good, beautiful, and true, because they are established in the reality of the self-revealing God.

⁴³ In the myriad of philosophical voices speaking on beauty and aesthetics, it seems wise to limit the scope of this paper explicitly to these Christian voices. Therefore, the writer will explore beauty and aesthetics primarily from the Christian tradition as it relates to theology. While there is much to learn from other perspectives, it is beyond the scope of this paper to look beyond the avant-garde of the Christian aesthetic tradition. At the same time, it must be noted that much of the Christian tradition owes nod to secular philosophers and thinkers. As Augustine is attributed to saying, the pagan world must be recognized, cited, and reinterpreted and established under the dominion of Christ.

⁴⁴ The centrality of beauty in Plato's writings can be found in *Symposium* and the *Dialogues of Phaedrus*. Aristotle's work *Poetics* has also been influential in the field of aesthetics.

⁴⁵ Herman Bavinck, "Of Beauty and Aesthetic," in *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 255.

Consequently, if the good, true, and beautiful are originally ascribed to God who is one,⁴⁶ they cannot be separated or opposed to one another in their inner natures.⁴⁷

For Balthasar, the most urgent need for modern Christianity is to win back the centrally important transcendental significance of beauty with intellectual rigor. According to Balthasar, “. . . the idea of beauty, he [Balthasar] lamented, had been reduced to that of a merely this-worldly aesthetics.”⁴⁸ Balthasar viewed theological aesthetics as the study of God’s glory, and argued that the beauty of the divine being has disappeared from theological discourse. He further pointed out that the attainment of independent status of aesthetics, compartmentalizing it from the transcendentals, had a negative consequence of insulating it from a holistic understanding of theology.⁴⁹ For Balthasar, beauty was not only one of the great signifiers pointing to God, but also one of the great transcendental realities that needed to be returned to its rightful place in Christian theology.

Like Augustine, Balthasar viewed beauty as one of the three transcendentals along with the good and the true.⁵⁰ For Balthasar, the transcendentals are inseparable, and their theological light only shines if undivided. Without beauty, the good loses its attractiveness and truth loses its cogency.⁵¹ Moreover, Balthasar’s conviction was that the order in which these transcendentals are approached is utterly determinative for the way theology can present the mysteries of the Christian faith to a skeptical public. According

⁴⁶ Deut. 6:4

⁴⁷ Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetic,” 255.

⁴⁸ Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 12.

⁴⁹ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6-12.

⁵⁰ Nichols, *Key to Balthasar*, 1.

⁵¹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 19.

to Balthasar, the skeptic would never “. . . come to affirm the truth of revelation unless . . . first perceive[d] it as beautiful.”⁵²

Therefore, maintaining the unity of the transcendentals bolsters their emotive and apologetic forces. Now, Balthasar acknowledges he is in no sense implying that “. . . the aesthetic perspective ought to dominate theology,” but its beauty must be rightly placed in the larger context of Christian goodness and truth to be justified in the economy of Christian theology.⁵³ As demonstrated in the first chapter, truth and goodness have dominated theological discussions in modern times, and while beauty is only one dimension of transcendental reality, Balthasar argues: “Beauty is the word that shall be our first. Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as uncontained splendor around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another.”⁵⁴

As for the function of beauty in relation to the other transcendentals, Balthasar thought that beauty “clarifies the double focus of—on truth and goodness—because it expresses its evidence or even its visible and objective proof.”⁵⁵ Balthasar argued that humanity could succeed in grasping the foundation of reality, or being, by way of the senses. One might categorize Balthasar as an epistemological optimist. Pertaining to beauty, Balthasar contended that no metaphysics of Being, as such, and its transcendental qualities can be separated from concrete experience, which is perceived through the senses.

For him, humanity knows that beauty exists from sensuous experience, which presents and withdraws it, reveals and conceals it. Balthasar reminds of the central

⁵² Edward T. Oakes, “The Apologetics of Beauty,” in *The Beauty of God*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 212.

⁵³ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 13.

⁵⁴ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 18.

⁵⁵ Stephan van Erp, *The Art of Theology* (Wilsele: Peeters, 2004), 55.

transcendental beauty of God, not only for maintaining and deepening the truth of the faith, but also for eliciting an ethical life in response to the faith. Maintaining the unity of the transcendental realities reinforces a holistic understanding of the great spiritual truths that have been long championed from Augustine to Balthasar. Beauty, along with truth and goodness, are three transcendental realities that function as portals that beckon finite beings into the infinitely glorious reality of God. It is arguable that because beauty operates primarily in the existential realm, it has not had its fair shake among the transcendentals.

However, as seen, beauty is not only one of the great existential signifiers pointing to God, but also one of the great transcendental realities that needs to be returned to its rightful place in Christian spiritual formation. As Smith has observed, the modern church has fallen prey to the intellectualism of modernity, thus underestimating the importance of the embodied experience of beauty and its place in holistic spiritual formation.⁵⁶ Again, Smith reasons that humanity's being-in-the-world is more aesthetic and deductive.⁵⁷ Therefore, neglecting beauty among the transcendentals flattens one's perception of God's creation as a disenchanted space, numbing one to the formative power of the aesthetic experience. Since beauty expresses evidence for truth and goodness by way of experiential proof, Christians must learn to be epistemological optimists.⁵⁸ This has particular application for spiritual formation.

Harper and Metzger argue that, along with truth and goodness, all Christians need to understand the role of beauty for spiritual formation, since it is a foundational part of

⁵⁶ James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 31-41.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 108.

⁵⁸ Contrary to Bavinck who held that beauty is less moving than truth or goodness. Bavinck, "Of Beauty and Aesthetic," 255.

our being as humans and as Christians.⁵⁹ Beauty and aesthetics have so often been neglected in the church, being viewed as ornamental and not as constitutive of the Christian faith.⁶⁰ They make a particular appeal to the benefit of referencing beautiful works of visual art and literature in preaching, education, and worship to provide a moving depiction of the truth and goodness of the Gospel story.⁶¹ Moreover, telling beautiful stories of Christian sacrifice and service can not only adorn the truth, but also allow congregants to be moved deeply by their good. Therefore, maintaining the unity of the transcendentals can bolster the role of beauty in spiritual formation. In this sense, Christians cannot come to appreciate truth and goodness holistically unless they are both perceived as beautiful. Therefore, beauty must be seen as clarifying the double focus of theology on truth and goodness. Without beauty, the good loses its attractiveness and truth loses its persuasiveness.

The Existential Reality of Beauty, Aesthetics, and Spiritual Formation

Aquinas is often quoted in discussions on aesthetics because of his formal definition of the beautiful, which is “his effort to characterize beauty in its objectivity with reference to its autonomous appearance,” and this begins with the experience of beauty.⁶² For Aquinas, a person or object is considered beautiful when it delights its beholder.⁶³ Thus, Aquinas develops his theory of beauty, beginning with aesthetic experience. For Aquinas, one is first struck and attracted to that which is beautiful. Second, one is drawn toward the object of beauty, while at the same time gaining

⁵⁹ See Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*.

⁶⁰ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 235.

⁶¹ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 235.

⁶² Andreas Speer, “Thomas Aquinas,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 77.

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I q. 5 a. 4 ad 1.

knowledge of that object. Finally, delight is experienced when the intellect and desire find rest in the beauty of the object. Simply put, Aquinas explains the aesthetic experience using the realms of cognitive thought and the appetite of desire. As Aquinas turned his theory toward theology, it is met with the one true God who is infinitely beautiful and desirable, and whom the soul can explore eternally.

Similar to Aquinas, Augustine forms his theory on the experience of beauty in parts or movements. For Augustine, the first movement of beauty is found in revelation where the eternal beauty becomes perceivable. The second movement of beauty is upward, which responds to God when He makes Himself perceivable. In effect, beauty in all of its unity, proportion, harmony, order, brightness, clarity, color, and pleasure serve as experiential signposts toward the one true and beautiful God. Therefore, God has left signposts to humanity through aesthetic experience in order to draw humanity toward the God in whom beauty originates. For Augustine, it is the experience of beauty, even in human artistry, that causes one to contemplate and press further into the nature of beauty:

And so I [Augustine] inquire of an architect, who has just built one arch, why he is at pains to make the one on the other side the exact equivalent, he will answer, I believe, that it is to have the parts of the building corresponding in every way . . . and if I press on with my questioning and ask why he is making that choice, he will say that this is how it should be, that this is beautiful, that this is what pleases the eye of the beholder.⁶⁴

Augustine reminds one of the power of beauty to seduce humanity into ceasing from restless journeying, with encouragement to move from oneself in the exploration of aesthetic experience. Notably, “Augustine is cognizant of just how easy it is to become distracted and immersed in the signs [of beauty] themselves, beautiful as they may be and to exchange ultimate delight for penultimate satisfaction.”⁶⁵ However, the journey of aesthetic delight should ideally move one toward the God of beauty. One will see that Aquinas and Augustine both land on God as the source of all beauty. Therefore, beauty

⁶⁴ Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. 8, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2005), 69.

⁶⁵ James Fodor, “The Beauty of the Word Remembered: Scripture Reading as a Cognitive/Aesthetic Practice,” in *Beauty of God*, 166.

beckons humanity to ultimate longing for God. In this sense, the experiential aesthetic desire finds no rest until it discovers what Jonathan Edwards referred to as mutual consent. Among some of the greatest thinkers in theological aesthetics stands Jonathan Edwards, who reflected much on the experience of beauty from a theological standpoint. As for the theory of mutual consent, Edwards is the premier tutor:

One alone, without any reference to any more, cannot be excellent; for in such case there can be no manner of relation no way, and therefore no such thing as consent. Indeed what we call One, may be excellent because of a consent of parts, or some consent of those in that being, that are distinguished into a plurality in some way or other. But in a being that is absolutely without any plurality, there cannot be excellency, for there can be no such thing as consent or agreement.⁶⁶

Again, here is the essential move from subjective experiential beauty to objective beauty, namely God. “Beauty is objective in that it is constituted by objective relations of consent and dissent among beings, relations into which the subject (or beholder) may enter and participate. . . .”⁶⁷ It is necessary that two beings are involved in mutual consent. For Edwards, the experience of true beauty involves God as one of those beings. “The beauty of the world consists wholly of sweet mutual consents, either within itself or with the supreme being. As to the corporeal world, though there are many other sorts of consents, yet the sweetest and most charming beauty of it is its resemblance of spiritual beauties.”⁶⁸ Therefore, the persons and objects of this earth that one finds beautiful ultimately point to the God of beauty. The twofold experiential relationship between the beautiful object that pleases and the subject it pleases is again picked up in the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Like Augustine before him, Balthasar argued that beauty can be defined as what pleases when seen. For Balthasar, the significant spiritual dimension of aesthetic pleasure has a formative impact on the beholder. In other words, beauty strikes humanity with

⁶⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), ccxxix.

⁶⁷ Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility*, 22.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1948), 135.

terrible, but wonderful power, making humanity marvel, utilizing the aesthetic senses. As Balthasar wrote, “Before the beautiful—no, not really before but within the beautiful—the whole person quivers. He not only finds the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it.”⁶⁹ Therefore, Balthasar explored aesthetics as “the part played at the higher level of our experience by the human senses . . . associated powers of memory and imagination.”⁷⁰ As Balthasar argued in *The Glory of the Lord*,

The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating. . . . We “behold” the form; but, if we really behold it, it is not detached from rather in its unity with the depths that make their appearance in it. We see form as the splendor, as the glory of Being. We are enraptured by our contemplation of these depths and are transported to them.⁷¹

For Balthasar, the ontology of beauty is nothing other than “. . . the experience of taking possession of the form in the act of vision and, second, of being carried off towards the abyss in the irruption towards the finite of the infinite and immense.”⁷² Once more, beauty is experienced in a twofold relationship between the object that pleases and the subject it pleases. In relation to God, Balthasar develops his theory of theological aesthetics in two phases. First, Balthasar’s theory of vision is centered on the perception of the form manifested in God’s self-revelation. Second, Balthasar’s theory of rupture, related to the incarnation of God’s glory, leads to the consequent elevation of man to participate in that glory.⁷³ Notably, this experience of beauty can be a two-edged sword.

⁶⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 247.

⁷⁰ Nichols, *Key to Balthasar*, 14.

⁷¹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 118.

⁷² Forte, *Portal of Beauty*, 57.

⁷³ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 125.

If the experience of beauty becomes the god that is worshiped, the glory of the one true God is not seen; thus, the intended function of aesthetic experience is deformed.

The existential reality of beauty would seem then to have a particular role in spiritual formation. If, according to Aquinas, something is beautiful when it delights its beholder, then the journey toward understanding beauty begins with aesthetic experience through the senses. Lloyd-Jones has noted a fear concerning society's preference for scientific preciseness and the neglect of experiential truth. In other words, there has been little use for the experience of beauty and aesthetics as it relates to spiritual imagination in the Christian life.

Concerning preaching, Lloyd-Jones argues, “. . . imagination has a real place in preaching the truth because what it does is to make the truth lively and living.”⁷⁴ The same is true for all of the spiritual disciplines, since humans are embodied creatures. Emotions and affections are stimulated through the successful use of sense appeal. Therefore, to consider the congregants as aesthetic experiencers, and even participators in beauty, may be helpful. Sense appeal adds a dimension to reality by helping the listener/viewer experience what is being presented. As embodied creatures, humanity's orientation to reality often begins with experience, namely, in the senses.⁷⁵

Moreover, the powerful aesthetic encounter reaches deeply within humanity, seeping into the core of one's being. Following the experience of beauty, one will ideally press further into the nature of that beauty, ultimately beholding the object of beauty. If God is the source of all beauty, then all beauty and aesthetic experience should ultimately lead to a longing to be possessed by God. As one's vision is centered on the perception of God's beauty, a call to respond and participate in His beauty is present. In preaching and teaching, this can be accomplished by the use of sensuous experience or evocative

⁷⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 235.

⁷⁵ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2009), 16-21.

language by enabling the listener to understand fully the existential reality of the truth being presented. In worship, the utilization of sense appeal helps the audience see, feel, and otherwise experience what is being presented in a way that closely approximates the reality concerning the subject.⁷⁶ Concerning Christian service, the church's good deeds beautifully form the participants, but also adorn the message allowing the unbelieving world to catch a glimpse, to taste and see that the Lord is good.⁷⁷

The Proper Discernment of Beauty, Aesthetics, and Spiritual Formation

Ironically, the idolatrous misappropriation of beauty already mentioned is what helped shape Augustine's spiritual development and thought on theological aesthetics. Augustine's writings make clear his existential journey of faith was indispensable to developing his ideas on discernment concerning beauty and aesthetics. The power and attraction of beauty was first learned from Augustine's love of lesser beauties. The power in these attractions was found in the objects that he esteemed as lovely or desirable. He writes, "What is beautiful? And what is beauty? What is it in the things we love that wins us over and attracts us?"⁷⁸ Augustine made a distinction between what is beautiful in itself and what is rendered beautiful by its setting or in the experience of it. For Augustine, beauty was not only found in the appearance of the object, but also because one finds pleasure in that beautiful object. However, again, the primary measure of beauty is not dependent on the taste of the subject, but is found in the object itself: ". . . these things please because they are beautiful."⁷⁹ Augustine came to argue that proper discernment of beauty is vital to understanding the object that aesthetically delights.

⁷⁶ Jay E. Adams, "Sense Appeal and Storytelling," in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art*, ed. Samuel T. Logan Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1986), 354.

⁷⁷ Ps. 34:8, and 1 Pet. 2:1-12

⁷⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, IV. 13. 20.

⁷⁹ Augustine, *Of True Religion*, 32. 59.

Again, much of Augustine's reasoning grew from his own reflection and experience of beauty, namely, in moving beyond things that he perceived as beautiful to the One who is beautiful.

In *Confessions*, Augustine repented of being consumed with lesser beauties, which distracted him from the most beautiful God:

Late I have loved You, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved You! And behold, You were within me, and I was outside, and I sought you there, and threw myself deformed, upon the beautiful things You made. You were with me; but I was not with you. Those things held me far from You; things which would not even exist unless they were in You. You called and cried out and broke upon my deafness; You shone forth and glowed and chased away my blindness; You blew fragrantly on me, and I drew breath and I pant for You; I tasted You, and I hunger and thirst for You; You touched me, and I was inflamed with desire for your peace.⁸⁰

In this passage, Augustine recalls the experience of beauty calling out to him, drawing him in, and yet, he realizes that while His Creator was calling him through lesser beauties, these beauties distracted him. Rightly, he did not despise the lesser beauties, knowing that their beauty is merely a reflected beauty derived from the fact that the one true and beautiful God is their origin. Discerning lesser and primary beauty also became a major theme in the writings of Jonathan Edwards, as well. One of the most formative discussions on theological aesthetics that Edwards offered the church concerned that of primary and secondary beauty. Edwards's outlook on beauty was essentially Platonic, which led him to distinguish from physical and spiritual beauty. Primary beauty was the true, spiritual, and divine beauty. Secondary beauty was considered subordinate, otherwise referred to as natural beauty.⁸¹ While primary beauty is particular to spiritual beings, secondary beauty is found in all kinds of objects, beings, and experiences. Edwards's philosophical foundation rested in that God is the source and foundation of all beauty in the created world.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, X. 27. 38.

⁸¹ Edwards, *Nature of True Virtue*, 31.

Therefore, Edwards would argue that beautiful things in creation “. . . all deformity and darkness in comparison of the brighter glories and beauties of the Creator of all.”⁸² Therefore, one encounters secondary beauty in the antechamber to the sanctuary of primary beauty. “All beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of the Being who hath an infinite fullness and brightness of glory.”⁸³ Edwards argued, “. . . when we are delighted with flowery meadows and gentle breezes of wind, we may consider that we only see the emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ.”⁸⁴ Edwardian scholarship has noted, “Throughout his writings he lauded spiritual beauty as things immeasurably greater and higher than any earthly or physical beauties.”⁸⁵ Thus, natural beauties were essentially portals pointing beyond themselves to their origins. According to Edwards, God employed material images to express immaterial realities. Therefore, the power of beauty is found in its suggestion of the spiritual reality beyond the physical world. True beauty was to be found in the realm of the spirit by giving consent to God’s being. For Edwards, this consent had connotations of volition, affection, and love. In other words, by consent, all things are held in relation to the awareness of God’s beauty.

The proper discernment of beauty has a significant role in spiritual formation as it relates to aesthetics. As noted, it would seem that the power and attraction of beauty is first learned from one’s love of beauties that are worldly or lesser, namely, in the pleasure of aesthetic experience. However, when it comes to spiritual formation, Christians must learn to move beyond the beauty of lesser objects toward the One who is beautiful, namely, God. For many, this should draw repentance from being consumed by lesser

⁸² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 10 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 421.

⁸³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 550-51.

⁸⁴ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 13, 278-80.

⁸⁵ McClymond and McDermott, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 94.

beauties, since they distract from the most beautiful God. Therefore, Christians must learn to discern between secondary and primary beauty. The practices of preaching, education, worship, and service cannot only help congregants experience biblical realities, but can also be utilized to help the church understand that “. . . the Christian life must be experienced, tasted, and lived” with proper discernment.⁸⁶

Again, Edwards is helpful on this point as it relates to spiritual formation. The practices of spiritual formation can have a powerful effect on the participant, shaping the affections “. . . by which the soul is carried out to what is in view, cleaving to it, or seeking it.”⁸⁷ With proper discernment, one comes to understand that,

. . . Holy affections are not heat without light; but evermore arise from some information of the understanding, some spiritual instruction that the mind receives, some light or actual knowledge. The child of God is graciously affected, because he sees and understands something more of divine things than he did before, more of God or Christ, and of the glorious things exhibited in the gospel. . . . Now there are many affections which do not arise from any light in the understanding; which is sure evidence that these affections are not spiritual.⁸⁸

Simply put, unless the affections are grounded in biblical realities, they are spurious and ungenuine.⁸⁹ It would be wise to heed and apply Edward’s wisdom on this point as it relates to spiritual formation; the aim should be to “. . . stir up the pure minds of the saints, quicken their affections by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, and setting them in their proper colours [*sic*].”⁹⁰ Edwards’s call to set aesthetic experience in its proper “colours” is a poetic way of referencing the importance of discernment of beauty.

⁸⁶ Joel R. Beeke, *Feed My Sheep* (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 97.

⁸⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections,” vol. 1, in *Works*, 237.

⁸⁸ Edwards, “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections,” 1:281-82.

⁸⁹ Samuel Logan’s comments on the phenomenology in “The Phenomenology of Preaching,” in *Preacher and Preaching*, 129-60.

⁹⁰ Edwards, “Treatise Concerning Religious Affections,” 1:242.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this chapter, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards, and Hans Urs Von Balthasar have provided several categories and parameters that contribute to the church's understanding of beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation. Thus, these influential theologians have equipped the church with a workable framework within which Christians can understand and appreciate beauty for their spiritual formation. Again, the parameters of these four topical themes, namely, the theological framework of beauty, the transcendental reality of beauty, the existential reality of beauty, and the proper discernment of beauty, have been investigated and applied with an aim to relate them to the spiritual formation of the church. Despite the fact that discussions on beauty and aesthetics vary from a murmur to a roar in the contemporary church, historical precedent exists for integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation. Moreover, the benefit of beauty and aesthetics for the spiritual formation of the church is acquired through practices, such as preaching, education, worship, and service.⁹¹

In the next chapter, the thesis that practices integrating beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation beneficial for the life of Protestant evangelical congregations will be explored further through a biblical framework utilizing the categories of systematic theology. A distinctively Christian conception of beauty and aesthetics must be derived from God's revelation in the Bible. To utilize the words of Dorothy Sayers, Christians must commit to biblical revelation in discovering the nature of all truth, and in this particular case, the nature of truth concerning beauty and aesthetics.⁹²

⁹¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 114.

⁹² Dorothy Sayers, *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 74.

CHAPTER 3

A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY, AESTHETICS AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Introduction

As argued in the first chapter, the categories of beauty and aesthetics have been neglected in the modern church, specifically for their relationship to spiritual formation.¹ Concerning spirituality in general, Peter Adam has observed, “. . . many evangelical Christians are weary of the word ‘spirituality’, fearing that is far removed from authentic faith and experience.”² How then can one come to an understanding of the objectivity of beauty, and a proper subjective response to beauty as it relates to spiritual formation? Following philosopher David Hume, seemingly that old adage “beauty is the in the eye of the beholder” adequately captures the overall ethos concerning the subject in contemporary culture and even in the life of the church.³

In other words, the belief that the perception of beauty is exclusively subjective leads to the conclusion that beauty itself is subjective. If no objective grounds exist for beauty and aesthetic experience, then Adams is correct in his assessment that these things are disconnected from the Christian faith. Without an objective Christian understanding of beauty and aesthetics, the disagreements over the subject of beauty may be difficult to adjudicate. However, Christian theology provides a way to show that beauty is not

¹ Balthasar, *Word and Revelation* and also see, Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*.

² Peter Adam, *Hearing God’s Words* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 21.

³ David Hume, *Essays, Moral and Political* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985).

exclusively consigned to the realm of subjectivity.⁴ For the Christian, beauty is grounded in the objective reality of the God of the Bible.⁵ Like all other subjects explored from a theological perspective, beauty must reflect “. . . the character, nature, or will of God.”⁶ This objective foundation not only informs one’s understanding of beauty, but also directs one’s subjective response to aesthetic experience. As stated in the second chapter, the discussions on beauty and aesthetics in the Christian tradition vary from murmur to roar, which makes the endeavor of relating these topics to spiritual formation all the more fruitful for the church.⁷

Indeed, Balthasar’s claim that these areas are the most neglected among theological studies and ecclesiological application seems valid. One would expect to find the subject of beauty more readily addressed in systematic theology texts used to train church leaders. However, as demonstrated in a previous chapter, modern systematic theology volumes have largely neglected the study of beauty and aesthetics and its implications on the spiritual formation of the church. While this seems to be the case, this chapter will establish that the Bible is not silent on the concepts of beauty or aesthetics. For this reason, theological foundation exists for integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations.⁸ Therefore, the specific aim of this chapter is to consider beauty and aesthetics from a

⁴ Wooddell, *Beauty of the Faith*, 51.

⁵ While some of the sources cited in this paper come from the Catholic tradition, this writer is writing from a Protestant Evangelical theological viewpoint, specifically from a Baptist tradition.

⁶ Joseph Wooddell, *The Beauty of the Faith: Using Aesthetics for Christian Apologetics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 47.

⁷ Note that most of the work done in the realm of theological aesthetics is primarily found in theological journals, theological society presentations, and obscure theological books devoted to some aspect of the discussion. However, very few have written on this topic on a popular level for the church as a whole.

⁸ In this chapter, several categories of systematic theology will be explored in relation to beauty and aesthetics. Other topics such as soteriology and ecclesiology will

biblical perspective, using the traditional categories of systematic theology, with the intention of applying these findings to spiritual formation.⁹

Beauty as a Biblical Category

Broadly speaking, systematic theology is a discipline that addresses theological topics in categories, attempting to summarize biblical teaching within those categories. One will quickly find that biblical texts are not primarily concerned with developing philosophical or analytical analysis of beauty, but are primarily a description of what is either externally or metaphorically beautiful.¹⁰ Nevertheless, as Gaebelien has observed, “. . . [The Bible’s] basic insights must provide not only the foundation for an authentic Christian aesthetic but also the corrective for the artistic theory derived from other sources, however excellent they must be.”¹¹ Within the Bible, extensive vocabulary is given for expressing the concept of beauty.

Modern English translations provide around one hundred biblical references to beauty or aesthetic pleasure.¹² Considering the wide range of things that appear beautiful to the biblical writers, one can identify evidence for the claim that God has made everything beautiful in its time.¹³ That is, the language of beauty points to the purpose of

be examined as subcategories throughout this thesis-project.

⁹ Systematic theology is a particular discipline within theological studies that, according to Stanley Grenz, “. . . summarizes religious truth or the belief system of a religious group through an organized system of thought carried out within a particular cultural and intellectual context.” Stanley Grenz, ed., *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 111.

¹⁰ Isa. 5:9, 28:5, 52:1, 62:3; Ezek. 7:20, 16:12, 23:42; Josh. 7:21; Lam. 2:15; Matt. 23:27; Rom. 9:21, Ps. 48:2; Prov. 20:29; and Ezek. 33:32

¹¹ Frank Gaebelien, *The Christian, the Arts and Truth* (Portland: Multnomah, 1985), 56.

¹² For one of the most extensive modern treatments on the use of the term “beauty” in the Bible, see Jo Ann Davidson, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008).

¹³ Eccles. 3:11

the object in reference. DuBose writes, “Though beauty is admired in its own right, it has a particularly lasting value because of its purpose. Beauty should enrich and bless. This is why the Hebrews came to develop such a rich vocabulary for the idea of the beautiful.”¹⁴ The Old Testament presents a Hebrew aesthetic vocabulary built from at least fourteen verbal roots, while the New Testament provides six Greek words. The range of these biblical words encompasses the ideas of spiritual, physical, and artistic beauty.¹⁵ Throughout the Bible, the language of beauty is applied to God, artifacts, people, and to nature.¹⁶ In the course of this chapter, each of these uses will be explored further in their respective systematic categories.

Beauty, Aesthetics, and the Doctrine of Revelation

One must begin the study of beauty and aesthetics in the same manner with which all subjects of inquiry from a uniquely Christian perspective begin, namely, the doctrine of revelation. The doctrine of revelation provides a theological foundation for the exploration of beauty and aesthetics, and even offers one with a prolegomena on the subject, that which needs to be understood before one can proceed. Revelation “. . . stands apart as the fundamental epistemological axiom of Christianity”; therefore, all truths find their underpinning in this doctrine.¹⁷

After all, Christianity is a revealed religion. “. . . Christian theology must begin with revelation because it knows that men [alone] cannot think about God save as

¹⁴ Francis M. DuBose, *God Who Sends* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983), 92.

¹⁵ Jo Ann Davidson, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008), 151-71.

¹⁶ *Artifacts*: Pss. 48:2; Isa. 5:9, 28:5, 52:1, 62:3; Ezek. 7:20; 16:12, 23:42, 33:32; Josh. 7:21; Lam. 2:15; Rom. 9:21. *People*: Gen. 12:11; 1 Sam. 25:3; 2 Sam. 14:25; Isa. 44:13; Prov. 20:29; Song of Sol. 1:15-16; and Acts 7:20; Heb. 11:23. *Nature*: Gen. 2:9; Ps. 19:1; Isa. 28:1, 4, 40:6; Song of Sol. 2:12-13, 7:13; Hos. 14:6; Matt. 6:28-29; and James 1:11

¹⁷ Gregory Thornbury, *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 53.

historic, communal beings and save as believers.”¹⁸ Christianity holds that revelation is dependent on God who “circumscribes and determines what can be known.”¹⁹ As Carl F. H. Henry notes, “God determines not only the if and why of divine disclosure, but also the when, where, what, how, and who.”²⁰ This has specific ramifications on the study of beauty, namely that God has sovereignly chosen to reveal himself and reflect his own beauty through specific and aesthetically pleasing means.

The revelation of his beauty is, therefore, an act of intentional self-revealing love on the part of God. The knowledge of, and ultimately communion with, the beautiful God of the Bible is the teleological purpose of divine revelation. Thus, the task of theology is the study of God that seeks to portray him accurately in light of divine self-disclosure. Yet, divine revelation does not completely bare all of what can be known of God. As Henry has noted, “God the revealer transcends his own revelation.”²¹ At the same time, one can rest in the knowledge that what has been revealed is sufficient for one’s exploration of beauty and aesthetics. The doctrine of revelation assumes the existence of a God, who actively reveals Himself, as well as His beauty. Therefore, to understand beauty and aesthetic experience properly without the clarifying focus of divine revelation is impossible.²²

From the outset, Christian theology presents revelation as God’s disclosure to everything else in creation in relation to Himself. One can then conclude that divine revelation is an intentional and imminent act of self-disclosure by a beautiful transcendent God, of Himself, and of everything beautiful in relation to Himself. Kuyper

¹⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 30.

¹⁹ Thornbury, *Theology for the Church*, 46.

²⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, vol. 2 of *Revelation and Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 9.

²¹ Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, 29.

expressed this truth well when He wrote, “The beautiful . . . has an objective existence, being itself of a Divine perfection. . . . We know this from the creation around us . . . for how could all beauty exist, except created by One Who preconceived the beautiful in His own Being, and produced it from His own Divine perfection?”²³

Navone concurs, “The revelation that God is the Creator, the Origin and Ground and Destiny of all creation, it is the ultimate basis for our affirming the . . . beauty of all things.”²⁴ It should follow that God’s revelation of Himself, and everything good created in relation to Himself, was given for human benefit. “The revelation that God is Creator, the Origin and Ground and Destiny of all creation, is the ultimate basis for our affirming the truth (knowability) and goodness (lovability) and beauty (delightfulness) of all things. All things can be known and loved and enjoyed because they are created.”²⁵

That God created the heavens and the earth, and established humanity over it provides two implications of the doctrine of creation toward aesthetics. First, God is the source of beauty. Second, humanity’s preoccupation with beauty and the aesthetic experience is God-ordained. God offers humanity privileged communion and experience over all other created beings.²⁶ However, God’s separateness from the things He created means that aesthetic delight and beauty, while being God-ordained, is not inevitably Christian.

Concerning the nature of revelation, one should recognize that some “. . . of God’s works are self-revealing simply by virtue of being his creations; others are his

²² Moreover, there must be rational beings capable of apprehending God’s revelation of beauty.

²³ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures On Calvinism* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 142.

²⁴ John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 1.

²⁵ Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, 1.

²⁶ Heb. 2:6

providential and miraculous actions in history whose purpose is disclosed to prophets and apostles.”²⁷ God reveals himself publically, either directly or indirectly, according to his good and sovereign will. Traditionally, two distinctions have been applied to the doctrine of revelation in order to achieve more precise discourse: these “two books of God” are known as special and general revelation.²⁸ While Scripture does not explicitly make the distinction between special and general revelation, these modes of distinguishing help in understanding the teleological difference between the two in their essential nature and comprehensiveness, and in the purpose which they serve in relation to beauty.²⁹

Beauty, Aesthetics, and General Revelation

First, consider the function of general revelation as it relates to beauty and aesthetics. General revelation holds forth knowledge of God as a reflection of His beauty. Russell Moore defines general revelation as “. . . the self-disclosure of God to all rational beings, a revelation that comes through the natural creation and through the makeup of the human creature,” but notes that the “challenge in constructing a thoroughgoing evangelical theology of general revelation lies in maintaining [the] biblical tension between the clarity of God’s disclosure and the distortion of it by fallen humanity.”³⁰ Broadly, it is affirmed that general revelation comes to all people everywhere. This truth can be related to the general appreciation of beauty across cultures and various

²⁷ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 115.

²⁸ John H. Gerstner, *Christian Faith and Modern Theology*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (New York: Channel Press, 1964), 97. These distinctions have also been known as supernatural and natural revelation.

²⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 126.

³⁰ Russell D. Moore, *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 71.

religions.³¹ In the event of creation, God's infinite and transcendent beauty broke forth in a general way to be experienced in creation order. This is seen clearly in the Old Testament, which proclaims God's creation as beautiful.³²

Historically, Christians have held that God reveals aesthetic truth and beauty through general revelation, including nature, culture, human reason, and good deeds. Most Christian theologians would hold that knowledge of God through general revelation is possible,³³ yet it is generally understood that such knowledge is limited in "scope, in coherence, and in depth."³⁴ Moreover, fallen humanity and the noetic effects of sin always subvert general revelation. For this reason, Michael Bird argues, "The qualification we need to make is that sinful persons suppress the knowledge of God as it has been made through creation, and the concept of nature is hardly neutral or self-evident."³⁵ While nature is not the ultimate theological authority, it does have its proper place within theology. General revelation, specifically nature, is ". . . not so much a source for theology as it is an inspiration for theology."³⁶ Therefore, beauty within general revelation can be viewed as a ". . . significant analogy to the creator of all."³⁷

The first chapters of Genesis portray that from the inception of creation, the infinite God poured Himself intimately into His finite creation. As Evdokimov eloquently proclaims, ". . . the first day of creation . . . is the joyous hymn of the Song of Songs sung

³¹ C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 181ff.

³² Gen. 2:9; Job 26:13; Ps. 19:1-6; and Song of Sol. 6:10

³³ The exception is Barth and others, who argue that the Holy Spirit needs no contact with creation, since God is wholly other than creation and does not need nature to make Himself known.

³⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2011), 152.

³⁵ Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 72.

³⁶ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 72.

by God himself, the flashing eruption of ‘Let there be light’ . . . means ‘let the revelation be.’”³⁸ The creation account of Genesis affirms God’s pleasure in His creation by declaring seven times that “it is very good,” denoting that what has been created is delightful and pleasant, and doing so by employing aesthetic terms.³⁹ The use of this declaration in the context of original creation hints at the aesthetic nature of God’s evaluative judgment upon the things He has made. In the same way, biblical writers often described the elements of creation—from lands, to trees, and even stones—as beautiful and pleasant.⁴⁰ From here one must ask, what does the beauty of the natural world actually communicate to humanity?

Beauty, Aesthetics and Special Revelation

The intent of general revelation and the reality of sinful suppression exposes the need for special revelation, more specifically, God’s revealed Word, the Bible. In this sense, the Bible is necessary to define and explain general revelation in light of its limitations and its distortion by fallen humanity. Ultimately, all revelation of God is supernatural in its origin, believing that it proceeds from Him and reveals Him; however, special revelation plays a distinct clarifying role. The natural world has long been held as a stimulus of theology in that it is “. . . God’s imprint of Himself through the created order of things.”⁴¹

³⁷ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 253.

³⁸ Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Steven Bigham (Torrance: Oakwood Publications, 1990), 6-7.

³⁹ Gen. 1:31

⁴⁰ Gen. 2:9, 3:6; Num. 24:5; Jer. 3:19, 11:6; Isa. 52:1, 60:13; Pss. 48:2, 50:2; 104:16; Lam. 2:15; 1 Kings 15:33; Dan. 11:16; Ezek. 16:13-14, 27:3-4, 11, 28:12, 17, 31:7-8, 32:19; Jer. 3:19; Hosea 14:6, Zech. 4:7; and Luke 21:5

⁴¹ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 70.

Providing clarity to the manner in which God has made Himself known, the psalmist writes in Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky proclaims the work of His hands.
Day after day they pour out speech;
night after night they communicate knowledge.
There is no speech; there are no words;
their voice is not heard.
Their message has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.

In a similar way, Paul's speech to the Gentiles at Lystra and at the Areopagus in Athens indicate that God has made Himself known through creation order.⁴² Moreover, Paul writes in Romans 1:19-20 that, "Since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what He has made."

In a sense, the universe and everything in it is God's work of art. Just as a poem contains the manifest design and intention of the author, God has made Himself evident to all mankind with the powerful poem of the universe.⁴³ Therefore, the beauty of creation is a vestige of the divine, at least implicitly or dimly.⁴⁴ "The beauties of the earth . . . are significantly analogous to the beauty of the Creator of all. The vast riches of creation are far too great to be ascribed merely to utilitarian purposes."⁴⁵ From the sky of Psalm 19, to the lilies of the field in Matthew 6, God's glory is reflected in the beauty of His creation. Therefore, if the foundation for the Christian faith is God's Word, namely

⁴² Acts 14:15-17, and 17:22-32

⁴³ Interestingly, in verse 20 of Acts 1, Paul argues that God is understood through what has been made, and the terminology "what has been made" has its same linguistic origins as the English word "poem."

⁴⁴ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 112-13.

⁴⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 443.

the Christian canon of Scripture, then the Bible provides clarity into the meaning or purpose of beauty and aesthetic experience.

Not only is the Bible necessary to define and explain the beauty of general revelation, the aesthetic nature of Scripture also enriches one's understanding of beauty. The Bible as a book is undergirded by its own aesthetic manifestation. In other words, the book that reveals the beautiful God to humanity is itself a significant literary work of art abounding with artistic beauty.⁴⁶ Therefore, as a literary work, the canon of Scripture affirms the importance of aesthetics not only through its semantic formulations, but also in its literary form. Beautiful literary conventions are present in the Bible from start to finish, even in its most woodenly factual historiography.⁴⁷ Literary structures, such as parallelism, meticulously crafted expression in biblical narrative, and artistically sophisticated poetry all attest to the significant role of beauty in God's revelation.⁴⁸

Ryken argues, "The example of the Bible confirms the importance of literary form and beauty." Moreover, if beauty and aesthetics were of no consequence in the biblical text, ". . . there would have seen no good reason for biblical poets to put their utterances into intricately patterned verse form, for Biblical story tellers to compose masterfully compact and careful designed stories."⁴⁹ Brown agrees and argues that the aesthetic dimension of Scripture is by no means negligible. The biblical writers have

⁴⁶ Clyde Kilby, "The Bible as a Work of Imagination," in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 105.

⁴⁷ Kilby, "The Bible as a Work of Imagination," 25.

⁴⁸ One of the most extensive explorations of these literary categories in relation to the aesthetic nature of the Bible can be found in Davidson, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, chs. 4-6.

⁴⁹ Leland Ryken, "Thinking Christianly About Literature," in *Christian Imagination*, 26.

written with an aesthetic dimension in mind, and have “. . . engaged readers to a significant degree by means of story, image, and symbol.”⁵⁰

Moreover, according to Davidson, “Not only [do] the poetry and narrative [of the Bible] exhibit aesthetical value, but also the actual vocabulary itself.”⁵¹ Therefore, the structure and vocabulary of the Bible informs one’s formulation of a beauty from a perspective that is distinctly Christian. Not only is God’s Word the source of truth by which a Christian values and critiques beauty, it is also instrumental for developing a Christian aesthetic. From a distinctly Christian perspective, the Bible stands as the foundation for all Christian theological inquiry into the subjects of beauty and aesthetics. With this established, one can then move to the Bible’s central subject, the God of the universe.

Beauty, Aesthetics, and the Doctrine of God

The foundational theological assertion concerning the subjects of beauty and aesthetics is that God is the origin of beauty and is also most beautiful himself. God is the object of study, precisely because he is its self-revealing beautiful subject; therefore, he alone is the source and substance of true beauty.⁵² As Ryken has argued, “. . . the Bible teaches that beauty is an attribute or perfection of God.”⁵³ Beauty is often discussed in relation to God’s glory, since it is a reflection of God’s glory, and “God’s glory is

⁵⁰ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 40-41.

⁵¹ Davidson, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, 151.

⁵² John 3:27; 1 Cor. 2:9-11b; Mark 10:18; and Ps. 62:6, 8

⁵³ Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of Imagination* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 36.

something that belongs to Him alone and is the appropriate outward expression of His own excellence.”⁵⁴

In a sense, glory becomes theological shorthand to encompass all that He is, including beautiful. Grudem defines the beauty of God as “. . . that attribute of God whereby he is the sum of all desirable qualities.”⁵⁵ In other words, the beauty of God is reflected in His character and nature, a visible sign of His moral perfection.⁵⁶ For this reason, Viladesau argues that beauty “. . . is essential to the theological explanation of God’s glory because it allows us to understand why this glory is not mere fact.”⁵⁷ Ortlund captures this thought well by proclaiming, “What is the glory of the Lord? His glory is the fiery radiance of his very nature. It is his blazing beauty. . . . The glory of the Lord . . . is God himself becoming visible, God bringing his presence down to us, God displaying his beauty before us.”⁵⁸ In this sense, the beauty of God elicits a worshipful response from those who are drawn in by “. . . its peculiar power and characteristic of giving pleasure, awakening desire, and creating enjoyment.”⁵⁹

In the Old Testament, the concept of beauty is applied to God in various ways. The Lord’s favor is characterized as His beauty in Psalm 90:17. The psalmist declares that strength and beauty are in God’s sanctuary.⁶⁰ In fact, the psalmist expressed a deep desire to dwell in the temple in order to delight in the Lord’s beauty, or His

⁵⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 218.

⁵⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 219.

⁵⁶ A. H. McNeile, *Book of Exodus* (London: Methuen, 1908), 215.

⁵⁷ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 26.

⁵⁸ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *Isaiah*, Preaching the Word, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 237.

⁵⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 653.

⁶⁰ Ps. 96:6

“incomparable perfections.”⁶¹ Throughout the Psalms, God is depicted as clothed in beauty and as the sum of all beauty.⁶² Likewise, the prophet Isaiah described God as a diadem of beauty to God’s people, a beautiful crown on display for Israel.⁶³ Moreover, the glory of God expressed as beauty is a fundamental motif in both the Old and New Testaments. Glory and beauty are central to the thought of the Apostle Paul, who argued that humans were created to enjoy God’s beauty and experience His beauty in Christ.⁶⁴ Furthermore, all of the longings of humanity aimed at delighting in the beauty of God are culminated in the return of Christ, when believers finally behold His face.⁶⁵

Throughout the Bible, the beauty of God draws humanity toward Him in wonder and elicits a desire to behold Him.⁶⁶ God is a God of glory, and God’s people experience His glory in the apprehension of His beauty.⁶⁷ Therefore, one could summarize the biblical and theological concept of beauty as affirming God’s essential glory and expressing desire to delight in that glory. Not only does Christian Scripture present God as the ultimate source of perfection and beauty, but it also affirms that He offers Himself as a gift to humanity so that His radiance can shine upon and be reflected in His creatures.⁶⁸

While God is transcendent, wholly and distinctly separate from the created world, He is also immanent, graciously revealing Himself to all of creation. Echoing Berkhof,

⁶¹ Ps. 27:4

⁶² Ps. 92:1; 95:6; and 103:1

⁶³ Isa. 28:5; 33:17; and 44:23

⁶⁴ Rom. 1:21-23; and 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:8

⁶⁵ Rev. 22:4

⁶⁶ Ps. 27:4

⁶⁷ Exod. 16:7; 24:16; 40:34; Lev. 9:6; Num. 14:10; and Deut. 5:24

⁶⁸ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 177.

one should note that God's revelation of Himself is a "... conscious, voluntary, and intentional deed,"⁶⁹ and is never passive. Consider Henry, who writes that revelation is "... a divinely initiated activity, God's free communication by which he alone turns his personal privacy into a deliberate disclosure of his reality."⁷⁰ The revelation of God's glory and beauty is experienced, or made evident, in three primary ways.

First, the revelation of God's beauty is experienced in His Trinitarian reciprocal love, "... a dynamic coherence of the three divine persons, whose life is eternally one of shared delight, fellowship, and joy."⁷¹ One scriptural witness to the infinite drama of Trinitarian delight in the baptism of Jesus, when the Father declares that He is pleased with the Son, which is affirmed in the Spirit's dissension to Jesus.⁷² John Navone puts this well: "Beauty itself manifests and communicates itself to all humankind in the glory and grace and truth and joy/delight that is the only Son of the Father. The Father has given us the Son and Spirit that we might share the triune God's eternal happiness."⁷³

Second, the revelation of God's beauty is most fully seen in Christ.⁷⁴ God's beauty is most manifest in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as prophesied by Isaiah: "The Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious."⁷⁵ The beauty of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, draws men toward the triune God. Jesus Christ upholds the image of God

⁶⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1932), 117.

⁷⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 2 (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 28.

⁷¹ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 155.

⁷² Mark 1:11; and Luke 3:22

⁷³ Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, 29.

⁷⁴ John 1:1-4

⁷⁵ Isa. 4:2; and 33:17

in man that was lost in the fall.⁷⁶ In other words, as the perfect image of God, Jesus Christ depicts the beauty of the Father perfectly in human form, yet without sin.⁷⁷ As Navone argues, “. . . Jesus Christ is the beautiful icon disclosing God, beauty itself, to the world.”⁷⁸ Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, which enables one to see God as he truly is.⁷⁹ The beauty of God, in Jesus Christ, transports one into the realm of God’s delight, which is an implication of one’s salvation in Christ. Again, Navone observes,

When humankind turned away, in self-will, from the Creator, it lost its beautiful conformity; the human image was deformed. Christ, the new Adam, is the perfect image/form of God, conformed in loving obedience to the Creator who has sent him to transform/transfigure the deformed image of the creator [in man]. Beauty Itself makes all humankind beautiful in and through its perfect form/image. We contemplate Beauty Itself in the crucified and glorified/risen Christ.⁸⁰

At this point in redemptive history, one is able to experience His beauty, but only in part. To use the words of the Apostle Paul, post-fall humanity sees through the glass darkly.⁸¹ In 1 John 3:2, John proclaims “when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” This eschatological vision of Christ points forward to the time when his beauty is made fully manifest to man. While Isaiah prophesied that the Christ would be a beautiful king, he also stated that the suffering Messiah would have “no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.”⁸²

Paradoxically, in one sense, Christ had no beauty that people should desire Him. At the same time, He also reveals the beauty of God’s glory most fully in His perfect life and sacrifice. To resolve this paradox, one must understand that the ugly act of Christ’s

⁷⁶ Col. 1:15-20; 2 Cor. 3:12-18; and Heb. 1:2-3

⁷⁷ John 14:9

⁷⁸ Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, 17.

⁷⁹ Col. 1:15

⁸⁰ Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, v.

⁸¹ 1 Cor. 13:12

⁸² Isa. 33:17; and 53:2

suffering on the cross became beautiful, because it was vicarious (on behalf of others) and salvific (for a redemptive purpose).⁸³ As Augustine argued, “He hung . . . on the cross deformed, and His deformity is our beauty.”⁸⁴ Viladesau concurs, arguing that the torturous cross is beautiful in that it represents Jesus’ ultimate faithfulness and self-gift love to God, even to the point of death, and the Father’s acceptance of this and answering in love with the Resurrection.⁸⁵

Third, this paradox is then fully resolved through the work of the Holy Spirit. The beauty of God in Christ must be revealed by the Holy Spirit in order for one to break free from blindness caused by the evil one and sin. As the Apostle Paul proclaims, the Spirit enables one to see the beauty of God in “. . . the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”⁸⁶ Thus, the Holy Spirit plays a particular role in this discussion, namely, of communicating God’s glory and Trinitarian love to the world.⁸⁷ It is the “. . . saving grace of God’s Spirit that enables us to apprehend divine beauty.”⁸⁸ In the economy of the Trinity, “the glory of the Father is manifested through his Word and Image, the Son, and the Holy Spirit leads us to see that manifested glory.”⁸⁹

The glory of God is diffused through the Holy Spirit, as the beautifier within the Trinity. Just as in creation, when the Holy Spirit fashioned the world into a beautiful place out of the chaos, the Holy Spirit continues to communicate God’s beauty to humanity, both through creation and revelation. The beautifying work of the Spirit has

⁸³ DuBose, *God Who Sends*, 95.

⁸⁴ Augustine, *Sermon xxvii*. 6. PL 38:181.

⁸⁵ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 189-97.

⁸⁶ 2 Cor. 4:4

⁸⁷ 1 Cor. 2:9-11

⁸⁸ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 14.

⁸⁹ Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 72.

“... an eschatological significance, in that it is the anticipation of the restored and transfigured world in which will be the fullness of God’s kingdom.”⁹⁰

Again, “In Jesus Christ, the perfect image of God, Beauty itself appears and grasps us in the very act of overwhelming us by his ineffable love. Jesus Christ is the concrete form through which the splendor of God irradiates and transfigures humankind so that, through the gift of his Spirit, we become . . . beautiful in Beauty itself; for Jesus Christ is the glory of God liberating us from our futile attempts at self-glorification.”⁹¹ For this transforming liberation to take place, humanity must understand the beauty of God through submission to His Word and Spirit. Because of the blinding power of sin, one must understand the biblical trajectory of humanity as it pertains to this discussion.

Beauty, Aesthetics, and the Doctrine of Humanity

Humanity’s capacity to behold the beauty of God is intrinsically related to God’s purposes in creation. In Genesis 2:7, “God demonstrated particularly delicate artistic skills when He sculpted Adam and Eve from earthen materials.”⁹² Man was fashioned by the master craftsman as an aesthetic being in both form and function.⁹³ Genesis 1:26-27 declares humanity was created in the image of God. Theologians have long debated of what exactly being created in the image of God consists. In general, being created in the image of God means man bears the likeness of God and represents God in particular ways.⁹⁴ As beings created in the image of God, humans are specifically endowed with physical, moral, and mental qualities among other things. These qualities are related to the discussion on beauty and aesthetics for several reasons.

⁹⁰ Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 161.

⁹¹ Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, 21-22.

⁹² Davidson, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, 16.

⁹³ Prov. 8:30

⁹⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 442.

First, throughout the Bible, like God, humans are physically described using aesthetic terms. The women of the Bible, like Sarah, Rebekah, Abigail, Rachel, Abishag, Bathsheba, and Esther are noted for their beauty.⁹⁵ During his love poem, the writer of the Song of Solomon often portrays his bride as beautiful.⁹⁶ Further, men are referenced for their beauty, for instance, David, Absalom, Daniel, Joseph, Jonathan, and even Moses as a child.⁹⁷ Not only is humankind described as beautiful, as beings created in God's image, humans seek to adorn themselves in ways that enhance their beauty. In the biblical literature, cosmetics and clothing were described as enhancing aesthetic appeal.⁹⁸ Moreover, humanity is depicted as longing to experience beauty. Israelite worship was beautiful, and the high priest's elaborate ceremonial robes were designed for glory and beauty.⁹⁹ Therefore, beauty and aesthetic appreciation are not only endowed by the Creator, but also cultivated by His creatures.

Second, beauty relates to humanity's moral capacities. Beyond physical beauty, both piety and resourcefulness were ascribed to people in the Bible as beautiful traits.¹⁰⁰ The Apostles Paul and Peter warned women against being satisfied with outward beauty, reminding them that beautiful character is the true adornment of godliness.¹⁰¹ Therefore, beauty has a moral trajectory and is often manifest in actions that are just, lawful, redemptive, and loving.¹⁰² One could argue that beauty is at the heart of all human

⁹⁵ Gen. 12:11, 24:16; and 1 Sam. 25:3

⁹⁶ Song of Sol. 1:15-16, and 4:7

⁹⁷ 1 Sam. 16:12; 2 Sam. 14:25; Dan. 1:15; and Exodus 1

⁹⁸ Gen. 41:42, 45:22; Exod. 26:36, 28:2; Isa. 3:18-24; and Rev. 3:4

⁹⁹ Exod. 28:2, 40

¹⁰⁰ Prov. 31:10-31; also see 1 Tim. 2:9-10; and 1 Pet. 3:3-5

¹⁰¹ 1 Tim. 2:9-10; and 1 Pet. 3:3-5

¹⁰² Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 445.

motivation, decision, and action. In other words, one acts in accordance to God's will when moved by the beauty of a particular good, namely, pleasing God.¹⁰³ Just as Smith has observed, it is often what one desires and loves that animates one's actions.¹⁰⁴

This is why Scripture's aesthetic metaphor of hearing and seeing is important to understanding how one is conformed through the Word. Beauty propels one to live in a just and loving way. Beauty is the portal through which truth and goodness are not only seen, but loved and pursued. Therefore, beauty has a formative role in the cultivation of the moral Christian life. Truly hearing God's Word means treasuring, obeying, and conforming to the beauty of His grace and call. A beautiful resonance of God's Word exists in the lives of those who conform to it for aesthetic living. For this reason, the Apostle Paul urges believers to live in a manner that will make the teaching of the Lord beautiful and attractive before unbelievers.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, Paul describes those who preach as beautiful.¹⁰⁶ In many ways, Christ's followers are called to live lives that will adorn the teaching of the Savior, beautifying it for nonbelievers. The moral beautification of the believer happens through the application of the Word, and is accomplished through the work of the Spirit.¹⁰⁷ The Spirit not only empowers one to desire and act justly and lovingly, the Spirit also opens the eyes of both the believer and nonbeliever to see God as the particular good that motivates just and loving actions.

Third, beauty relates to the mental qualities of humanity, such as reasoning and reflection.¹⁰⁸ In relation to aesthetics, human beings are the only creatures that seem to

¹⁰³ Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, 24-25.

¹⁰⁴ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), particularly 39-73.

¹⁰⁵ Titus 2:10

¹⁰⁶ Rom. 10:15

¹⁰⁷ Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 163.

¹⁰⁸ In systematic theology, these capacities are often identified within the substantive view of humanity, which explores particular qualities of humanity bearing

exhibit the capacity to reflect on and delight in beauty. As Mohler observes, “. . . the desire for and recognition of beauty is something unique to human beings. Dogs do not contemplate a sunset. Animals do not ponder the beauty of a landscape. It is true that the heavens declare the glory of God, but most of the creatures on the planet are oblivious to this fact.”¹⁰⁹ God uniquely created human beings as aesthetic creatures possessed with a distinct capacity for beauty. As noted in the second chapter, theologians presuppose the communion of the two knowing agents, humanity and God, in the beauty that has been made accessible and comprehensible.

Moreover, not only is man created in the image of God as aesthetic creatures, people were also created with the capacity to cultivate and create beautiful things. In the garden, humans were given what is often referred to as a cultural mandate, to care for and cultivate God’s beautiful creation as His representatives over the earth.¹¹⁰ Seerveld makes a compelling case for artistic creation as a proper response to God’s call in Genesis for man to cultivate the earth in order to praise His name.¹¹¹ He argues, “. . . the creation of God is unfinished, waiting historically to be used; its variegated meanings are waiting there to be unleashed in a new chorus of praise for the Lord.”¹¹²

That humanity is created in the image of God provides the theological grounding for human ability for aesthetic delight and for creative capacities and imagination. “God’s common grace endows all people . . . with a capacity for truth, goodness, beauty, and

God’s image.

¹⁰⁹ R. Albert Mohler, *The Disappearance of God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2009), 48.

¹¹⁰ Gen. 1:28; and Ps. 8:5-6

¹¹¹ Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence, 1980), 23-28.

¹¹² Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World*, 25.

creativity.”¹¹³ Aesthetic endeavors are retraceable to the earliest parts of human civilization. Even in the genealogy of the line of Cain, early examples of music (and by extension the arts in general), along with farming and technology, can be found.¹¹⁴ This is a point Veith develops further by arguing that “every occupation . . . involves an art. Shoemakers, physicians, soldiers, merchants, rulers—all are artists in that they exercise their skills creatively to make a product or perform a service for others.”¹¹⁵ This is an important corrective “. . . to a common bias among historians, who tend to trace the development of the human race in terms of tools and weapons.”¹¹⁶

Aesthetic invention has played “. . . a large part . . . in man’s effort to build a meaningful world.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, humanity’s aesthetic impulse is important for understanding what Wolterstorff conceptualized in terms of “world projection.” The act of creating beautiful things involves the presentation of an alternative world to be considered by its audience.¹¹⁸ Implicit in this theory is the idea that beautiful things function between the artist and the audience to communicate by evoking emotion, conveying truth, and illuminating the world. Wolterstorff helps one see that, in the act of world projection, the artist mimics God’s original creative act by fashioning a world for public appreciation. Therefore, the capacity for art, beauty, creativity, and aesthetic delight is something that humanity should cultivate as a gift from God. “. . . human beings bear the image of God, and all of their creative efforts reflect this fact. As God’s

¹¹³ Leland Ryken, *Culture in Christian Perspective: A Door to Understanding and Enjoying the Arts*, Critical Concern Book (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), 13.

¹¹⁴ Gen. 4:20-22

¹¹⁵ Gene Edward Veith, *State of the Arts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 31.

¹¹⁶ Ryken, *Culture in Christian Perspective*, 59.

¹¹⁷ Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 153.

creation of the world is a self-expression, so are human artistic works.”¹¹⁹ Therefore, the cultivation of beautiful things, such as art, should be done to the praise of God’s name.

Foundational to humanity’s call to cultivate and create beautiful things is God’s endorsement of such activities. “Clearly God, the ultimate Artist who created every detail of the universe purely from His own imagination, values the arts.”¹²⁰ The use of art in the Exodus tabernacle not only illustrates the value of artistry, but also that artistry is a gift from God.¹²¹ In this passage Bezalel is not only affirmed in his vocation as artist, but is also filled with the ability to fulfill his calling. In Exodus 35:31 one reads: “He has filled him with God’s Spirit, with wisdom, understanding, and ability in every kind of craft.”

Furthermore, this specific case, along with the tabernacle instructions in Exodus, serve to illustrate God’s value and investment in artists and their aesthetic endeavors. Ryken notes that one finds abstract (nonrepresentational), representational, and symbolic art in both the tabernacle and the temple.¹²² In other words, the temple was covered in precious stones for aesthetic reasons.¹²³ Schaeffer notes, “There was no pragmatic reason for the precious stones. They had no utilitarian purpose. God simply wanted beauty in the temple.”¹²⁴ As seen in these texts, the arts can be used to picture or point to a spiritual reality of God’s glory and the edification of His people.

¹¹⁸ Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 122-55.

¹¹⁹ Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 428.

¹²⁰ Gene Edward Veith, *The State of the Arts* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 25.

¹²¹ Exod. 31:1-11; and 35:30-36:2

¹²² Ryken, *Culture in Christian Perspective*, 54-57.

¹²³ 2 Chron. 3:6

¹²⁴ Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 26.

It must also be noted that, just as with any other aspect of human life, beauty and aesthetics can take a dark turn in the hands of sinful man. The doctrine of sin has a far-reaching effect on all of creation, including aesthetic experience and the perception of beauty. The depraved nature of humanity effects a natural denial of God as the ultimate source of beauty and the gifts of aesthetic pleasure as coming from Him. The fallen nature makes it possible for aesthetic experience; the perception of beauty and the arts can have immoral effects on their audience. Exodus 32:1-29 and Romans 1:21-23 make clear that men can exchange the glory of God for manmade images. The idolatry of Aaron's calf illustrates the ease in which humanity can pervert the artist's gift and elevate art to godlike status. Babylon illustrates the perversion of architecture. Fiction becomes pagan myth of which Paul warned Timothy.¹²⁵

For this reason, something must be said about the task of discernment when experiencing and evaluating beauty. If beauty and aesthetics are understood as secondary, a pale reflection of the primary beauty of God, then one can avoid the fear and idolatrous pull that is related to much of these experiences. Edwards argued that “. . . all deformity and darkness in comparison of the brighter glories and beauties of the Creator of all.”¹²⁶ Again, “All beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of the Being who hath an infinite fullness and brightness of glory.”¹²⁷ In this sense, when one delights in any beauty on earth—whether it be in the natural world or in the museum, one is only seeing emanations that come from the God of all beauty.¹²⁸

What makes the task of proper discernment difficult is that beauty is first learned from one's love of beauties that are worldly or lesser, namely, in the pleasure of aesthetic experience. Yet, even as Christians must learn to move beyond the beauty of lesser

¹²⁵ 1 Tim. 1:3-4

¹²⁶ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 10, 421.

¹²⁷ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 8, 550-51.

objects toward the One who is beautiful, namely, God, the power and attraction of lesser beauties often become a barrier to pointing beyond themselves. With proper discernment, one comes to understand that unless the affections are grounded in biblical realities, they are spurious and ungentle.¹²⁹ It would be wise to heed and apply Edward's wisdom on this point as it relates to spiritual formation, the aim should be to “. . . stir up the pure minds of the saints, quicken their affections by often bringing the great things of religion to their remembrance, and setting them in their proper colours.”¹³⁰ Moreover, grounding one's discernment in the biblical categories of beauty allow for a theological robust criteria for understanding and judging aesthetic experiences.¹³¹

As Seerveld wrote, one must remember beautiful things and aesthetic experiences are “. . . the rainbows God made for a fallen world.”¹³² By God's common grace, humanity is still able to do much in the development in the areas of beauty and aesthetics. Grudem argues, “. . . the more Christian influence there is in a society in general, the more clearly the influence of common grace will be seen in the lives of unbelievers as well.”¹³³ As for the tendency toward idolatry, God does not forbid the making of beautiful

¹²⁸ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 13, 278-80.

¹²⁹ Samuel Logan's comments on the phenomenology in “Phenomenology of Preaching,” 129-60.

¹³⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 242.

¹³¹ Schaeffer's *Art and the Bible* comes to mind. Schaeffer offers four standards of judgment related to art: technical excellence, validity, intellectual content, and integration of content and vehicle (62-71). Additionally, Cowan and Spiegel offer some helpful criteria in *Love of Wisdom*, 418-48.

¹³² T. Chris Crain, “Is Beauty Beyond the Boundary? The Beastly Nature of Evangelical Theology,” “A paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society meeting, Colorado Springs, CO, November 16, 2001, 8.

¹³³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 497.

things, but rather the worship of it. As John reminds the church, keep yourselves from idols.¹³⁴

Beauty, Aesthetics, and the Doctrine of Eschatology

While sin has dark implications for humanity here and now, a day is coming when all of creation will view and delight in the beauty of God. Wright notes that Romans 8 reminds Christians they are “. . . poised between creation and new creation.”¹³⁵ The current world groans in travail, waiting to give birth to the world to come. Even though creation order is good, and even beautiful, its beauty is at present transient.¹³⁶ The biblical writers declare that God is a crown of beauty for His faithful remnant, and that God’s people should long with an expectation of basking in His beauty—a beauty that no one has yet fully seen.¹³⁷ Beholding the Lord’s beauty is central to the hope of God’s people.¹³⁸ Therefore, Scripture presents an implicit theology of beauty as affiliated with divine eschatological redemption. This is accomplished as the beautiful One returns in power and glory to make all things new.¹³⁹

The Christian hope of salvation involves liberation from the decay of sin and the transfiguration of human bodies through the resurrection.¹⁴⁰ In the second coming of Christ, all of God’s people will be changed in a moment when seeing Christ “face-to-face.”¹⁴¹ Of note, this change occurs when one simply beholds the glorious beauty of

¹³⁴ 1 John 5:21

¹³⁵ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 222.

¹³⁶ Rom. 8:20-22

¹³⁷ Isa. 28:5.; and 1 Cor. 2:9

¹³⁸ Ps. 90:17; and Isa. 61:3

¹³⁹ Rev. 21:5

¹⁴⁰ Rom. 8:18-19; and Phil. 3:20-21

¹⁴¹ 1 Cor. 13:12; 15:51-52

Jesus Christ.¹⁴² Grudem captures this eschatological longing well, “When we realize that God is the perfection of all we long for or desire, that he is the summation of everything beautiful or desirable, then we realize that the greatest joy in the life to come will be that we shall see his face.”¹⁴³ Theologians often refer to this eschatological apprehension of Christ as beatific vision.¹⁴⁴ For the Christian, this is the consummation of the knowledge of God, when His beauty brings full aesthetic delight and eternal joy to humanity.¹⁴⁵

With this in mind, it should hardly surprise that beauty plays such an important role in the Bible’s eschatological trajectory. Throughout the Bible, God is described in undeniable splendor. Thus, the concept of beauty is more significant than simple attractiveness. As demonstrated in this chapter, beauty is similar—if not synonymous—with God’s glory. The one who sits on the throne of the universe has “the appearance of jasper and a rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircling the throne.”¹⁴⁶ Moreover, New Testament descriptions suggest believer’s glorified bodies will possess a beauty, attractiveness, and even radiance as a reflection of the beauty of Christ. The glorification of God’s people and the renewal of creation are directly related.¹⁴⁷ When Christ returns and abolishes sin, and its effects on the cosmos, all things will be made new.¹⁴⁸ Specifically, the Holy City—the final estate prepared for God’s people—will be gloriously adorned as a beautiful bride for her husband with precious stones.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴² 1 John 3:2; and 2 Cor. 3:18

¹⁴³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 190.

¹⁴⁴ “Beatific” comes from two Latin words meaning “blessed” (*beatus*) and “to make” (*facere*).

¹⁴⁵ Ps. 16:11

¹⁴⁶ Rev. 4:3

¹⁴⁷ Gen. 3:14-19; and Rom. 8:18-25

¹⁴⁸ Rev. 21:5

¹⁴⁹ Rev. 21:2

Conclusion

As already argued, modern theologians have largely neglected inquiry into the topics of beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation. As a result, beauty and aesthetics have largely lost connection with the theological development in the church and need to be restored to their rightful place at the theological table. For the Christian, beauty must be grounded in the objective reality of the God of the Bible. While theologians have been largely silent on the concept of beauty, the Bible is not. The Bible uses an extensive vocabulary for expressing the concept of beauty and categorical groupings that reference beauty. Therefore, in order for the church to obtain a more holistic spiritual formation, beauty must be understood within its biblical and theological categories. Again, the Bible provides a solid foundation for understanding beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation.

In both general and special revelation, God has lovingly chosen to reveal Himself and reflect His own beauty through means that are specific and aesthetically pleasing. The doctrine of revelation assumes the existence of God, who actively reveals Himself, as well as His beauty for human benefit. Throughout creation, God's infinite and transcendent beauty has broken forth in a general way to be experienced by all of humanity.¹⁵⁰ Most evangelical Protestant Christians hold the impossibility of a proper understanding of beauty and aesthetic experience without the clarifying focus of divine revelation. Therefore, a theology of beauty and aesthetics developed from a systematic study of God's revelation is foundational to these subjects as they relate to Christian spiritual formation. A proper theology of beauty leads one to understand that God is the source of beauty, and that humanity's preoccupation with beauty and the aesthetic experience is God-ordained.

As for the beauty of creation, Christians hold that knowledge of God through general revelation is sufficient, yet it is generally understood that such knowledge is

limited in scope, coherence, and depth. Therefore, general revelation is not so much a source for theology as it is an inspiration for theology, a significant analogy to the creator of all things beautiful. Aesthetic experience offered in general revelation provides the church a taste of God's transcendent beauty. As demonstrated above, biblical writers describe the elements in aesthetic terms as being beautiful and pleasant. Through spiritual formation practices, such as preaching, teaching, worship, and service, the church can utilize the inspiration of general revelation found in the natural world and in the creative arts to arouse a deep desire for God.

Just as a poem contains the manifest design and intention of the author, God has made Himself evident to all mankind with the powerful poem of the universe. Therefore, all revelation of God proceeds from Him and reveals Him. However special revelation plays a distinct clarifying role to the manner in which God has made Himself known through creation.¹⁵¹ Biblical writers have written with an aesthetic dimension in mind, and have engaged readers to a significant degree by means of story, image, and symbol in its structure and vocabulary. In this sense, God's special revelation in the Bible not only inspires, but also captivates human interest for beauty. In spiritual formation practices, the Bible must be central to the correct arousing of intellectual and emotional enjoyment, inviting the participants to appreciate God's multifaceted beauty.¹⁵²

In other words, God's Word—the source of truth by which a Christian values and critiques beauty, it is also instrumental for developing a Christian aesthetic. In preaching, teaching, worship, and service, the Bible is foundational to defining and expressing the church's concept of beauty and shaping the use of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation. Without special revelation in the Bible, humanity would not know that the beauty of the heavens has a particular aim in declaring the glory of God.

¹⁵⁰ Gen. 2:9; Job 26:13; Ps. 19:1-6; and Song of Sol. 6:10

¹⁵¹ Psalm 19, Matt. 6:28; Acts 14:15-17, 17:22-32; and Rom. 1:19-20

¹⁵² William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 475.

Not only is the Bible necessary to define and explain the beauty of general revelation, the aesthetic nature of Scripture also enriches one's understanding of beauty. The Bible as a book is undergirded by its own aesthetic manifestation as a significant literary work of art abounding with artistic beauty. As the church applies the biblical language of beauty to God, artifacts, people, and nature, it will understand the significant value for aesthetic experiences for spiritual formation. In other words, God's Word provides clarity into the meaning or purpose of beauty and aesthetic experience, namely for enriching and blessing the beholder by pointing them to the one true and beautiful God.

The foundational theological assertion concerning the subjects of beauty and aesthetics is that God is the origin of beauty, and is also most beautiful Himself. God is the object of study, precisely because he is its self-revealing beautiful subject and is the source and substance of true beauty. Throughout the Bible, the beauty of God is reflected in his character and nature, a visible sign of his moral perfection. For spiritual formation, the beauty of God should be utilized to elicit a worshipful response from those who are drawn in by its peculiar power for giving pleasure, awakening desire, and creating enjoyment. Moreover, because God's revelation of himself is a conscious and voluntary act, it should not be seen as passive. Divine revelation is an intentional loving act of communication by which God deliberately discloses his beauty to humanity. Therefore, spiritual formation practices should aid the Christian in connecting beauty and aesthetic experience to God's self-disclosure.

In this sense, spiritual formation practices should be utilized to proclaim the revelation of God's beauty as most fully experienced in his Trinitarian reciprocal love. This has a particular Christ-centered focus, in that Jesus is the perfect image of God, depicting the divine beauty perfectly in human form through his perfect life and sacrifice. Moreover, the Christian must understand that beauty of God in Christ is dependent on the

revelation of the Holy Spirit. In order for one to break free from blindness caused by the evil one and sin, the Holy Spirit is the acting agent who opens the eyes of the believer to behold God's beauty.¹⁵³ Therefore, as spiritual formation practices aim at aiding the Christian in the apprehension of God's beauty, the splendor of God transfigures humankind so that—through the gift of his Spirit—we not only see his beauty, but also become beautiful. In other words, as the beauty of God is depicted in preaching and education, the believer is not only evoked to worship, but also to reflect that beauty in Christian service. The connection between worship and service is formative. As Beale has demonstrated, what people revere, they resemble.¹⁵⁴ In other words, biblically informed worship shapes believers' hearts and hands to reflect the beauty of God through an aesthetic life adorned with service.

This gives one a particular understanding of how beauty and aesthetics can be instrumental in spiritual formation. Beauty and aesthetic appreciation are not only endowed by the Creator, but also are cultivated by His creatures. First, a beautiful resonance of God's Word exists in the lives of those who conform to it for aesthetic living, namely, in a manner that will adorn the Gospel Word through an attractive life before unbelievers. This moral beautification of the believer happens through the application of the Word, and is accomplished through the work of the Spirit. Moreover, beauty relates to the mental qualities of humanity, such as reasoning and reflection. Human beings are the only creatures who seem to exhibit the capacity to reflect on and delight in beauty, but being created in the image of God, people were also created with the capacity to cultivate and create beautiful things. Implicit in this theory is the idea that beautiful things function between the artist and the audience to communicate by evoking emotion, conveying truth, and illuminating the world. Therefore, the capacity for art,

¹⁵³ As already demonstrated, the glory of God is diffused through the Holy Spirit, as the beautifier within the Trinity. Thus, the Holy Spirit's particular role in Trinitarian communication is revealing the beauty of God to the world.

beauty, creativity, and aesthetic delight is something that humanity should cultivate as a gift from God.

Foundational to humanity's call to cultivate and create beautiful things is God's endorsement of such activities.¹⁵⁵ However, the doctrine of sin has a far-reaching effect on all of creation, including aesthetic experience and the perception of beauty. The fallen nature makes it possible for aesthetic experience to have an immoral effect on their audience.¹⁵⁶ Even more so, sin does more than distort the proper response to beauty and use of the arts; sin also vexes the artistic task, casting a dark shadow over such endeavors, now created under the duress of sin. However, in spite of sin, aesthetic pleasure and beauty still adds enrichment to human life. The current world groans in travail, waiting to give birth to the world to come. Creation order is good, it is beautiful, but its beauty is at present transient.

In the second coming of Christ, all of God's people will be changed in a moment when beholding the glorious beauty of Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁷ With the eschaton in view, one comes to understand that God is the summation of everything beautiful and desirable, the fulfillment of humanity's longing for perfect beauty and complete aesthetic delight. Therefore, spiritual formation practices should be aimed at eliciting a taste for God's eternal beauty. In preaching, teaching, worship, and service, the church should be given a framework to understand the eschatological trajectory of transient aesthetic experience.

It has been said, "Sound theology leads always to the love of beauty. When there is no love of beauty . . . there is no sound theology."¹⁵⁸ This theological perspective on

¹⁵⁴ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008).

¹⁵⁵ Exod. 31:1-11; and 35:30-36:2

¹⁵⁶ Exod. 32:1-29; and Rom. 1:21-23

¹⁵⁷ 1 Cor. 13:12; 15:51-52; 2 Cor. 3:18; and 1 John 3:2

¹⁵⁸ Douglas Jones and Douglas Wilson, *Angels in the Architecture* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1998), 24.

beauty and aesthetics necessitates that it is not so much an option as it is a necessity for the spiritual formation of the church. God alone is the one who satisfies humanity's deepest yearning for beauty.¹⁵⁹ All the beauty of this world points to the breathtaking beauty of God. In a world without beauty, declares Balthasar, "What remains is then a mere lump of existence."¹⁶⁰ The church must not only link beauty to the glory of God, but also to her joy. Therefore, beauty and aesthetics cannot be removed from spiritual formation, for they are grounded in the objective reality of the God of the Bible. Christians understand more than anyone else that beauty is not found in the eye of the beholder, but in the God who is beheld.

As demonstrated above, theological foundation exists for integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations. In the next few chapters of this thesis, the practical outcomes of this study will be explored by using an assessment of the strategies for intentional use of beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation practices of the church. The research will be collected from select Protestant evangelical pastors and leaders by using a questionnaire audit instrument along with open-ended questions. The research from these questionnaires will be utilized to construct a practical theology of beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation.

¹⁵⁹ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 138.

¹⁶⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 19.

CHAPTER 4

THESIS-PROJECT RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

The initial chapters of this thesis-project have been exploratory in nature, namely, researching the relationship between beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation. Research has sought to explore reasons beauty and aesthetics are important in the spiritual formation of a congregation. With the previous chapters, the problem, setting, and the theological framework (both historical and systematic) have been established, demonstrating that the integration of beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation of a congregation is an important aspect of church life. The goal of this project has not only been to assess the value of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices of spiritual formation, but also to provide practical examples of how this integration can be achieved. These final chapters will focus on the practical applications and solutions in the context of the spiritual formation practices of Christian preaching, teaching, worship, and service. The previous chapters set the trajectory necessary in order to develop a framework for, and description of, a congregation that is aesthetically healthy.

Research Methodology: Participants

This particular chapter of the thesis-project was designed to focus on the practice of ministry, and the need to develop a framework for integrating beauty and aesthetics into the life of a local congregation. This framework was built by utilizing semi-structured questionnaires with pastors and church leaders who are regarded as leaders in

the field of theological aesthetics and the arts.¹ For the sampling of this study, field participants were identified using several criteria. First, church leaders who have published well-received articles and book length treatments on the topics of beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation were sought to contribute.² Second, desired thought leaders and pastors have taught on the subjects of beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation in a theological seminary and in local churches.³

Last, utilizing social media directed at pastors and church leaders, the names of individuals who have been influential in their own understanding of beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation were obtained.⁴ These criteria allowed the research to be narrowed to a field of questionnaire participants who are not only respected and influential in the area of theological aesthetics and the arts in their writings and formation as ministry practitioners. By implication, these participants value the integration of beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation of the church and have given much thought to this topic. Once this list of influencers was identified, they were initially contacted and invited to participate in the study. Because of the geographic distance and schedules of the participants, the field research was accomplished through email questionnaires where each participant was sent a questionnaire. Even though the email questionnaires allowed for more flexibility in the research, several of the desired

¹ A complete list of participants can be found below.

² The bibliography for this thesis-project provided the initial list of potential individuals who could be utilized for the research.

³ By searching seminary curricula, this writer was able to identify these participants. Moreover, interaction with the initial respondents provided additional references for the research project.

⁴ The inquiry utilizing social media allowed this writer to interact with twenty-eight pastors and church leaders who provided the additional names of individuals who should be considered as part of the sampling. See Matt Capps, "Status," accessed September 18, 2016, <https://twitter.com/MattCapps/status/671885470599618561>.

participants declined because of time restraints.⁵ Overall, the process of data collection happened rather smoothly and in a timely manner.⁶ The sampling of willing participants consists of theologians, pastors, and church leaders regarded and respected in the fields of beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation. Below is an annotated list of the fourteen participants in this study.

1. Scott Aniol (Ph.D., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is Assistant Professor and Chair of Worship Ministry, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Aniol teaches courses on aesthetics and spiritual formation on both the masters and doctoral levels. Dr. Aniol has published several books on worship and serves as the managing editor of *Artistic Theologian*, a scholarly journal of worship and church ministry.
2. Kevin T. Bauder (Ph.D., Dallas Theological Seminary) is Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis. Dr. Bauder has co-published *A Conservative Christian Declaration*, which seeks to explore the transcendent, absolute principles of truth, goodness, and beauty, and their relation to Christian ministry.⁷
3. Jeremy Begbie (Ph.D., University of Aberdeen) is Thomas A. Langford Research Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School, where he also leads the Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts. Dr. Begbie has published numerous books, including *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* and *Voicing Creation's Praise*.⁸
4. William Dyrness (D.Théol., University of Strasbourg) is Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. Dyrness is a founding member of the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts at Fuller Theological Seminary. Dyrness has published several books, including *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*.⁹

⁵ The desired participants included Mike Cospers (Pastor of Worship and Arts at Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, KY), and Frank Burch Brown (Frederick Doyle Kershner, Professor Emeritus of Religion and the Arts at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, IN). However, both men pointed to their written works as resources for the research.

⁶ The majority of the respondents returned their completed questionnaires within a week. Only two of them responded the following month.

⁷ Kevin T. Bauder, Scott Aniol, David De Bruyn, Michael Riley, Ryan J. Martin, and Jason Parker, *A Conservative Christian Declaration* (USA: Religious Affections Ministries, 2014).

⁸ Jeremy Begbie, *Beholding the Glory* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001); and idem, *Voicing Creation's Praise* (New York: T&T Clark, 1991).

⁹ William Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

5. L. Clifton Edwards (Ph.D., University of St Andrews) is a military chaplain and Adjunct Professor of Religious Studies at Hawai'i Pacific University. Edwards has published several journal articles and a book titled *Creation's Beauty as Revelation: Toward a Creational Theology of Natural Beauty*.¹⁰
6. Dan Forrest (D.M.A., University of Kansas) is an award-winning composer, church musician, and educator. He writes choral and instrumental music for both concert performance and church use. Dan has written several journal articles and popular level articles on worship.
7. Makoto Fujimura (B.A., Bucknell University), is a twenty-first-century contemporary artist and the director of the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts at Fuller Theological Seminary. Additionally, Fujimura published a book titled *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life*.¹¹
8. Scott Horrell (Th.D., Dallas Theological Seminary) is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary where he teaches a course on a Christian view of arts. Dr. Horrell's interest in the intersection of the arts and the Christian life was at L'Abri under Francis Schaeffer.
9. Bruce A. Little (Ph.D., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) is Senior Professor of Philosophy at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Little is the Director of the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture at SEBTS, and also teaches a seminary course on Christian Faith and the Arts.
10. Mark Ryan (MATS, Covenant Theological Seminary; M.Div., Trinity Theological Seminary/University of Liverpool) is Director of the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute and Adjunct Professor of Religion and Culture at Covenant Theological Seminary. Ryan teaches courses on the arts in both the undergraduate and graduate level.
11. Gesa Thiessen (Ph.D., Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy) is a lecturer in theology at Trinity College in Dublin and is non-stipendiary minister at the Lutheran Church in Ireland. Thiessen's research interests include Theological Aesthetics and Theology and the Arts. Dr. Thiessen has published *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*.¹²
12. Jay Wegter (M.Div., The Masters Seminary) is the Executive Director at Gospel for Life and Adjunct Professor of Theology and Christian Worldview and Apologetics, The Master's College. Additionally, Wegter is a professional artist.
13. Joseph Wooddell (Ph.D., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is Vice President of Academic Affairs and Professor of Philosophy at Criswell College. Dr.

¹⁰ L. Clifton Edwards, *Creation's Beauty as Revelation: Toward a Creational Theology of Natural Beauty* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

¹¹ Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life*, ed. Peter Edman (New York: International Arts Movement and the Fujimura Institute, 2015).

¹² Gesa Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).

Wooddell has published *The Beauty of the Faith: Using Aesthetics for Christian Apologetics*.¹³

14. Brian Zahnd is the lead pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. Zahnd is the author of *Beauty Will Save the World*.¹⁴

Research Methodology: Survey Research

In order to collect the desired data, the questionnaire was designed to use both quantitative and qualitative questions in order to elicit information on the topic.¹⁵ The quantitative questions utilized Likert-scale response anchors from which respondents choose one option that best aligns with their view.¹⁶ Moreover, these quantitative questions were followed up with qualitative questions in order to probe further on the theological or biblical reasons for the responses given. In the qualitative portion of the questionnaire, the interviewee utilized specific open-ended questions, allowing the respondents to provide answers in their own terms or in a manner that reflects respondents' own perceptions rather than those of the researcher.¹⁷

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to "Get an informant on to a topic of interest and get out of the way. Let the informant provide information that he or she thinks is important."¹⁸ Therefore, each interviewee was informed of the general topic before engaging with the questions, namely, the role of beauty and aesthetics in spiritual formation. Each of the interviewees was directed to respond to the exact same

¹³ Joseph Wooddell, *The Beauty of the Faith: Using Aesthetics for Christian Apologetics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

¹⁴ Brian Zahnd, *Beauty Will Save the World* (Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2012).

¹⁵ The questions used to guide these interactions can be found in appendix B.

¹⁶ Wade M. Vagias, *Likert-type Scale Response Anchors* (Clemson: Clemson University, 2006).

¹⁷ For this purpose, the interviewer avoided leading questions.

¹⁸ H. Russell Bernard, *Analyzing Qualitative Data: Systematic Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 27.

quantitative and qualitative questions in their questionnaires.¹⁹ The questions are listed below:

The Role of Beauty and Aesthetics in Spiritual Formation

Name:

Vocation/Title:

1. How important do you think the integration of beauty and aesthetics are for the spiritual formation of the church?

Not at all important

Low importance

Slightly important

Neutral

Moderately important

Very important

Extremely important

Can you expound upon the biblical and theological reasons for the level of importance placed on beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation?

2. To what extent have you studied about or been instructed in the role of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation?

Never

Rarely

Occasionally

A moderate amount

A great deal

Can you elaborate on your education, experience, and involvement with beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation?

3. What thinkers or resources have you found to be most helpful in integrating beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual formation of a congregation? (*Perhaps it is something you have written.*)

¹⁹ The data was collected from the questionnaire and organized thematically in the last chapters.

- 4. Considering best practices, what ways have you heard of or seen churches successfully integrate beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual formation of a congregation?**
- 5. In your opinion, what are some of the barriers and challenges that pastors and leaders may face in incorporating beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual formation of their congregation?**
- 6. Could you suggest a few practical ways in which churches could integrate beauty and aesthetics into the following practices of spiritual formation in order to develop their congregation's aesthetic sensibilities, and ignite their imaginations to the beauty of God and the Christian life?**

Preaching

Education

Worship

Service

Research Methodology: Survey Questions

The primary function of the questionnaire was to elicit information on the interviewee's thoughts on the importance of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation, but also to identify resources, examples, and suggestions for practical application in developing a congregation that is aesthetically healthy. Here are a few explanations as to the questions that were used in the process.

The first question—"How important do you think the integration of beauty and aesthetics are for the spiritual formation of the church?"—was an attempt to explore how high the respondents regarded the topic and its importance for a congregation. In a sense, this is both a strength and weakness of the research—strength in that the interviewees are able to provide the most helpful direction, because of their expertise and experience with the topic. Additionally, this could be seen as a weakness in that they represent a specialized minority within the church.

However, the goal of the research is not to assess the overall climate of thought within the church on this topic, but rather to provide a way for the church to move forward in integrating beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation of the church.

Thus, the initial questions warranted their position as part of the avant-garde of church leaders seeking to integrate beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual life of the church.²⁰ Moreover, the follow-up qualitative question allowed respondents to provide biblical and theological justification for the level of importance placed on this issue in order to enhance the grounds already explored in previous chapters for practical application of integrating beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual formation of a church.

The second question allowed the interviewees to identify and elaborate on their education, experience, and involvement with this subject. Questions three and four intended to narrow the list of resources and examples that the participants would point to as helpful for developing an understanding or strategy for utilizing beauty and aesthetics for the spiritual formation of a congregation. Question four sought to explore the best practices, namely, what ways had the interviewees heard of or seen churches successfully integrate beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual formation of a congregation. Thus, questions three and four sought to build a reference list of writers and examples that would help to enhance the final chapter focusing on practical application of integrating beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation of the church by providing resources and illustrations from existing church life.

The fifth and sixth questions focused in on the reasons for, and practical ways to integrate beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual formation of the church. Question five asked the participants to identify barriers and challenges that pastors and leaders may face in incorporating beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual formation of their congregation. This question was intended to allow the research not only to build on the

²⁰ In a sense, this provides justification for the perceived weakness of using a sampling of experts in this study.

setting explored in a previous chapter, but also to provide ways to overcome the challenges related to the issue at-hand. The final question allowed participants to suggest a few practical ways in which churches could integrate beauty and aesthetics in the focused practices of spiritual formation, namely, preaching, teaching, worship, and service. Therefore, these questionnaires sought to engage human insight, understanding, and experience with a pragmatic focus in order to inform philosophy of ministry and decision-making in the local church.

Research Methodology: Evaluative Application

All of the information provided in the questionnaire was instrumental in fulfilling the primary aim of this research, namely to develop practical strategies for a congregation that is aesthetically healthy.²¹ In questioning field experts on beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation, the objective of the research was to identify resources, examples, and best practices that would help frame the practical and theological implications of the research conducted in the initial chapters of this thesis-project. In the last chapters of the thesis-project, the information collected was organized thematically in order to provide a synthesis evaluation, bringing all the data collected in the questionnaires and research from previous chapters together as a way forward in this important ecclesiological conversation. Therefore, the findings and application in the last chapter is presented in a way that converses and integrates with the previous chapters exploring the problem, setting, and the theological framework (both historical and systematic) related to the topic.²²

Once more, the final chapters utilize this research in order to develop a framework or formative evaluation for a disciplined inquiry within their ministry as it relates to

²¹ This qualitative research will be supplemented with published thoughts or strategies pertaining to the subject by these pastors and church leaders.

²² A synthesis evaluation is a formal approach of drawing together research on a specific topic with the purpose of providing analysis, drawing out implications, and proposing recommendations for application.

beauty and aesthetics. This will be accomplished as churches assess their intentional use of beauty and aesthetics for the spiritual formation in the areas of preaching, education, worship, and service. Moreover, by implementing some of the ideas presented in the questionnaires, churches can better utilize beauty and aesthetics for the spiritual formation of their congregation.

CHAPTER 5

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY, AESTHETICS, AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Introduction

The initial chapters of this thesis-project have been exploratory in nature, namely, researching the relationship between beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation. The research has sought to explore reasons beauty and aesthetics are important in the spiritual formation of a congregation. However, as demonstrated in the first chapter, the church, by-and-large, has failed to provide an account of the role of beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation, even though a historical and theological foundation exists for such endeavors.¹

A few initial observations from the questionnaires confirm the need for much work to be done in this area. First, among the interviewees, there seemed to be a lack of consensus on the primary Christian influencers in the areas of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation. When asked, “What thinkers or resources have you found to be most helpful in integrating beauty and aesthetics into the spiritual formation of a congregation?” it was interesting to note the diversity of names mentioned. While several modern Christian theologians and pastors were noted, the interviewees readily pointed to both artists and philosophers.² Of the central thinkers explored in the historical theology

¹ Chapters 2-3.

² Modern Christian theologians and pastors noted were: Os Guinness, C. S. Lewis, Albert Mohler, Frank Gaebelin, William Dyrness, Thomas Dubay, David Bentley Hart, Henri Nouwen, Frank Burch Brown, Patrick Sherry, Calvin Miller, Jerram Barrs, James McCullough, John Piper, Albert Wolters, Wes Vander Lugt, Makoto Fujimura, John Dillenberger, Ken Myers, Vigen Guroian, Brian Zahnd, Paul Tillich, and Horst Schwebel. Artists noted were Steve Turner, T. S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Matthias Grunewald, Johanne Sabastian Bach, Dan Siedell, and Elaine Scarry. Philosophers noted

chapter of this thesis-project, all but one was mentioned.³ The influential thinkers mentioned more than once were Francis Schaeffer, who was mentioned four times, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Begbie, mentioned three times, and both Hans Rookmaker and Herman Bavinck mentioned twice.

Second, using Likert-scale response anchors to place value on the need to integrate beauty and aesthetics into spiritual formation, the majority of the respondents answered “very important” or “extremely important,” and only one respondent answered in a way that indicated a lower value, namely “moderately important.” Third, it is interesting to note that several of the interviewees stated they have not been formally educated in this area, rating the extent of their study and instruction as being “rare” or “a moderate amount,” and much of their interest in beauty and aesthetics has grown out of their own personal interests, reading, and research.⁴

Of the interviewees who indicated “a great deal” of study and instruction in this area, all of them have either earned degrees related to this field of study, taught on the topic, written book-length treatments on beauty and aesthetics, or are artists who have integrated beauty and the Christian life in practice.⁵ The range of responses pertaining to this question revealed the lack of consistent emphasis placed on beauty and aesthetics in the area of spiritual formation, except for those who have pursued such intentional studies out of personal interest or for particular projects. Again, confirming the assertion set forth in the first chapter of this thesis-project, namely, that most of the reflection and writing

were Roger Scruton, Vishal Mangalwadi, Sen no Rikyu, Shusaku Endo, Jaques Maritain, and Hildegard Von Bingen.

³ Jonathan Edwards, St. Augustine, and Hans Urs von Balthasar. No mention was made of Aquinas.

⁴ William Dyrness, Kevin Bauder, Bruce Little, and Mark Ryan all noted that they have not been formally educated in this area. Bauder explained that he was never challenged in this area formally, and that much of his understanding has grown out of a personal interest developed in reading, conversing, and experiencing beauty and aesthetics in the Christian life.

⁵ Brian Zahnd, Gesa Thiessen, Jay Wegter, Scott Aniol, Joseph Woodell, and Makoto Fujimura.

on the subjects of beauty and aesthetics remain cornered by trained specialists in the theology and philosophy, namely in the specialized field of aesthetics.⁶ Overall, the Christian community seems to have neglected the subjects of beauty and aesthetics, especially in theological works used to train church leaders.⁷

Yet, as Brown argued, “. . . doing aesthetics is not so much a theological option as a theological necessity.”⁸ In being a necessity, beauty and aesthetics—like all other matters of faith—must be integrated into the spiritual formation of the church. As stated in the first chapter, beauty and aesthetics are tantamount to a holistic understanding of human experience and knowledge from a Christian perspective. According to Calvin Seerveld, if the “. . . aesthetic life is malfunctioning or undeveloped . . . then that human life missed a notch, has bare spots, or possibly suffers deformity.”⁹ Therefore, it stands to reason that the neglect of beauty and aesthetics can have a negative outcome on the holistic spiritual health of the church. For this reason, one’s foundational understanding of beauty and aesthetics provides the Christian explanation needed and sets the trajectory for the practices related to spiritual formation.

With the previous chapters, the problem, setting, and the theological framework (both historical and systematic) have been established. In the first chapter, it was demonstrated that beauty and aesthetics have largely lost connection with the spiritual formation of the church and needs to be restored to its rightful place in the life of Protestant evangelical congregations. This chapter will focus on the practical applications and solutions in the context of the spiritual formation practices of Christian preaching,

⁶ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 15.

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 18.

⁸ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 37.

⁹ Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence, 1980), 50.

teaching, worship, and service. The goal of this project has not only been to assess the value of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices of spiritual formation, but also to provide practical examples of how this integration can be achieved.

In titling this chapter “A Practical Theology of Beauty, Aesthetics, and Spiritual Formation,” the aim is to relate theory to practice. Practical theology “. . . engages in and examines actions that seek to achieve particular ends.”¹⁰ According to Richard Osmer, the pragmatic task of practical theological interpretation involves “strategies and actions . . . undertaken to shape events towards desired goals.”¹¹ In what follows, the theories and theology expounded in the previous chapters are interwoven with the practices of preaching, education, worship, and service to be applied to spiritual formation in the context of the local church.¹²

Theological and Philosophical Foundations for Practice

Once again, foundational to this study is the belief that aesthetic experience has a powerful role in the formation of a person from cognitive, affective, and volitional levels.¹³ As identified in the first chapter, throughout the history of the church, the tendency has been to create a polar dichotomy between the spiritual and physical realms.

¹⁰ Ray S. Anderson, “Practical Theology,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. VanHoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 614.

¹¹ Richard S. Osmer, *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 10.

¹² Osmer’s four core tasks of practical theological interpretation have been followed throughout the formation of this thesis-project. The first chapter sought to address the *descriptive-empirical task* of gathering information in order to discern patterns and dynamics in the particular context of the modern Protestant evangelical congregation. Moreover, by addressing the problem and setting, the *interpretive task* was accomplished by drawing on theories to understand better why these patterns and dynamics are occurring. The historical and theological chapters provided sufficient research to address the normative task in interpreting the context of the study and constructing theological and ethical norms to guide practice. Last, this chapter has the *pragmatic task* of determining strategies of action to influence situations in ways that are desirable. Osmer, *Practical Theology*.

¹³ Evan Howard, *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 84-85.

Often this dualism led to an asceticism, which set Christians up to be deeply suspicious of the very things in which beauty finds its initial mediation, namely, the body and the senses. However, sensory experience in spiritual disciplines has a powerful role in the formation of a Christian.¹⁴ Again, as expressed in the historical review of the subject, God's self-communication in creation and his self-revelation in history provide grounds for endless exploration. This divine beauty has an attractive and motivational power, thus revealing function of beauty for the Christian as sanctifying, which was, according to Edwards, the most significant aspect of one's participation in beauty.¹⁵

Many of the interviewees noted that holistic formation must move beyond the faculties of rational cognition, and integrate sensory and experiential means of spiritual development.¹⁶ Bruce Little, one of the interviewees, pointed out that beauty and aesthetics "... fills out the human's humanness in a rich and powerful way as nurturing not only the cognitive dimension of humanity but the emotion and spiritual."¹⁷ Nichols is helpful in this area as he describes theological aesthetics as the area of theological inquiry that "consider[s] the part played by the senses—with their associated powers of memory and imagination—in awareness of God."¹⁸

Thus, the interviewees stand in the long tradition of Christian theology affirming the significant spiritual dimension of aesthetic pleasure, which has a formative impact on the beholder. As argued by Balthasar, beauty strikes humanity with terrible—but

¹⁴ Howard, *Brazos Introduction*, 85.

¹⁵ Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 194.

¹⁶ Additionally, this includes the emotions. In fact, Morrissey notes the infamous dualism between reason and emotion, and how that has obscured formation. In too many cases "... reason is reduced to an abstract rationalism and emotion is identified with irrational passions." Michael P. Morrissey, "Reason and Emotion: Modern and Classical Views on Religious Knowing," *Horizons* 16 (1989): 275. However, as Elliot argues, "Reason and emotion are interdependent." Matthew A. Elliott, *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 47.

¹⁷ Bruce Little, email questionnaire, December 4, 2015.

¹⁸ Aiden Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 14.

wonderful—power, makes humanity marvel, and utilizes the aesthetic senses.¹⁹ This theory is rooted in the doctrine of humanity, which posits that God offers humanity privileged communion and experience over all other created beings.²⁰ As demonstrated in the third chapter of this thesis-project, God uniquely created human beings as aesthetic creatures endowed with a distinct capacity for beauty. In relation to aesthetics, human beings are the only creatures who seem to exhibit the capacity to reflect on and delight in beauty. That humanity, created in the image of God, provides the theological grounding for human ability for aesthetic delight and for creative capacities and imagination.

With this in mind, one must understand that aesthetic experience can advance understanding in two ways: shaping the mind through progressions of thought and expanding perception through experience.²¹ In this sense, aesthetic experience is a viable means of spiritual development, in that it helps form one's knowing and understanding as well as of sensual delight related to God and the Christian life.²² As Jay Wegter noted in the interview, "A holistic view of spiritual formation must include the reasons why God gave us a hunger to bring beauty into our lives and why He has bestowed the ability and yearning" for aesthetic experiences.²³

¹⁹ James K. A. Smith is important on this point in demonstrating that the modern church has fallen prey to the intellectualism of modernity, thus underestimating the importance of the embodied experience of beauty and its place in holistic spiritual formation. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 31-41. Again, Smith reasons that humanity's being-in-the-world is more aesthetic and deductive (ibid., 104). Therefore, neglecting beauty among the transcendentals flattens one's perception of God's creation as a disenchanted space, numbing one to the formative power of the aesthetic experience. Since beauty expresses evidence for truth and goodness by way of experiential proof, Christians must learn to be epistemological optimists.

²⁰ Heb. 2:6

²¹ Gordon Graham, "Learning from Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35, no. 1 (1995): 26-37.

²² James McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality* (Eugene: Cascade Books: 2015), 21.

²³ Jay Wegter, email questionnaire, December 3, 2015.

In this sense, “Christianity is not merely a matter of correct doctrine, but also of correct conduct and especially correct affections.”²⁴ Once again, throughout history, aesthetic invention played “. . . a large part . . . in man’s effort to build a meaningful world.”²⁵ Implicit in this theory is the idea that beautiful things function between the artist and the audience to communicate by evoking emotion, conveying truth, and illuminating the world. Therefore, the capacity for art, beauty, creativity, and aesthetic delight is something that humanity should cultivate as a gift from God.

Theologically, beauty and aesthetics are important for glorifying God, for “to glorify God is essentially to rightly apprehend and delight in his beauty.”²⁶ It is important to return to the historical discussion here and note that Aquinas developed his theory of beauty beginning with aesthetic experience. For Aquinas, one is first struck and attracted to that which is beautiful. Second, one is drawn toward the object of beauty, while at the same time gaining knowledge of that object. Finally, delight is experienced when the intellect and desire find rest in the beauty of the object. Similarly, for Augustine, the first movement of beauty is found in revelation where eternal beauty becomes perceivable through the senses and rational mind.

The second movement of beauty is upward, which responds to God when He makes Himself perceivable. Foundational to this exchange is Edwards’s concept of mutual consent between two beings, the God of beauty and humanity that is uniquely capable of perceiving and enjoying beauty. In the same sense, Balthasar summarizes this concept by arguing that beauty is experienced in a twofold relationship between the object that pleases and the subject it pleases. For this reason, the practices of spiritual formation are integral as a bridge in integrating beauty and aesthetics in the Christian life.

²⁴ Kevin Bauder, email questionnaire, December 3, 2015.

²⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine* (New York: Brace and World, 1966), 153.

²⁶ Scott Aniol, email questionnaire, December 10, 2015.

As demonstrated previously, spiritual formation in its most basic sense is a metaphor for the assimilation of qualities and capacities for participation in a life with God.²⁷ In other words, spiritual formation is the result of cumulative religious experiences, mediated by or in encounters with beauty and aesthetically rich incidents. Therefore, aesthetic experiences can have a powerful role in directing one's attention to God. It is important to maintain that, unique to the Protestant tradition concerning beauty and aesthetics, is the centrality of the written Word of God. In other words, Protestant evangelical Christian spirituality is distinct in its strong emphasis on providing biblical parameters for formation. Adam concurs, noting that “. . . the roots of all our theology and spirituality lie in the revelation of God in Christ, articulated by the Spirit in the Bible.”²⁸

Biblically guided practices seek to integrate the intellect, affections, relationships, and behaviors as part of the spiritual-formation process. Once again, Smith is helpful here in arguing that biblically guided spiritual formation practices shape how persons imagine the world. He writes, “Christian formation is a conversation of the imagination effected by the Spirit, who recruits our most fundamental desires.”²⁹ From a biblical perspective, the way beauty provides glimpses of the transcendence of God not only makes one aware of Him, but also prompts one's aesthetic longings toward Him. Therefore, in spiritual formation practices, the congregation should be provided with images and analogies that produce impressions that are comparable to the theological reality being communicated.³⁰ Unless the affections are grounded in biblical realities, they are spurious and ungenuine.

²⁷ McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality*, 11.

²⁸ Peter Adam, *Hearing God's Words* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 29.

²⁹ James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 15.

³⁰ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

As a discipline, spiritual formation has a goal-oriented aim in spirituality or progressive change in character, which seems to find validation in the New Testament, particularly in the letters of Paul.³¹ For this reason, spiritual formation must be strategic. Particularly with beauty and aesthetic sensibility, the aim is to develop eyes that see and ears that hear.³² In his study, *Sense and Spirituality*, James McCullough's delineation of specific means of aesthetic formation illustrates the strategic nature of this task. "Aesthesis refers to sensory perception and, by extension, its contribution to the development of the imagination. *Ascesis* originated as an athletic term, but was adopted for the disciplines associated with progressive growth in spirituality."³³ Thus, Christian spirituality should aim to bring into contact and correlate a set of biblical and theological beliefs with existential experiences and spiritual practices for the formation of the believer.³⁴

As stated in the first chapter, McGrath is helpful here in arguing that "Christian spirituality concerns the quest for fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith."³⁵ In theological terms, the subjective experience of beauty points beyond itself to the objective beauty that can be found in that object's creator or origin, namely, the God of the universe. In

³¹ Rom. 8:29, 12:2; Gal. 4:19; and 2 Cor. 3:18

³² According to McCullough, the word "spirituality" speaks to the intersecting dynamics of the cognitive, affective, and even psychomotor dimensions of religious life. McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality*, 11.

³³ McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality*, 9.

³⁴ Specifically for Protestant evangelical Christians, these sensory experiences must be grounded in and guided by God's Word. Therefore, a biblical and theological vision of beauty and aesthetics should enable one to discern properly and understand the God-intended purpose for beauty and aesthetic experience with the utilization of human intellect, affections, relationships, and behaviors.

³⁵ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 15.

this sense, the foundation of a proper understanding of beauty and aesthetics must be related to the God of beauty.

Therefore, aesthetic experiences can have a powerful role in directing one's attention to God. Spiritual formation practices that harness these experiences can be beneficial and powerful assets for the Christian life. Sensitivity to beauty requires appropriate aesthetic disposition, a disposition that widens the sphere of one's awareness and awakens imaginative possibilities. For this reason, Mark Ryan noted that "beauty and an increased perception of beauty can stimulate and encourage spiritual training and formation."³⁶ Additionally, Gesa Thiessen noted in the questionnaire, "The aesthetic, the perception through the senses, has and continues to play a fundamental role in religion and in worship."³⁷

Again, Aquinas demonstrated that the ways in which beauty provides glimpses of the transcendence of God not only makes one aware of Him, but also prompts aesthetic longings drawing one toward Him. In the same way, Augustine genuinely believed one perceives beauty and recognizes its ultimate source in God by the inner self. The foundational theological assertion concerning the subjects of beauty and aesthetics is that God is the origin of beauty, and is also most beautiful himself. God is the object of study, precisely because he is its self-revealing beautiful subject; therefore, he alone is the source and substance of true beauty.³⁸

In light of these foundational assertions, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the spiritual formation practices of Christian preaching, teaching, worship, and service in order to build a framework for a congregation that is aesthetically healthy. As Makoto Fujumura noted in the questionnaire, it is important to remember, "... God is an artist, and beauty is one of God's essential qualities. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible

³⁶ Mark Ryan, email questionnaire, December 15, 2015.

³⁷ Gesa Thiessen, email questionnaire, December 4, 2015.

³⁸ John 3:27; 1 Cor. 2:9-11b; Mark 10:18; and Ps. 62:6, 8

makes clear that God desires to create a world that not only functions well, but also created with excessive and gratuitous beauty. The church, as the Body of Christ, is to become a bride to Christ—beautifully prepared.”³⁹ The following practices are aimed at preparing the bride of Christ, beautifully formed and aesthetically healthy by utilizing both receptive and formative means.⁴⁰

Beauty, Aesthetics, and Preaching

In the majority of Protestant evangelical churches, sermons are central to the spiritual formation of a congregation. Concerning the utilization of beauty and aesthetics in sermons, Dryness lamented over the “tradition of focus on the sermon and the word rather than other ways in which God’s truth might be mediated (art, film and even popular culture).”⁴¹ In other words, churches have failed to utilize aesthetic tools in order to present the truth. While this may be the case, this writer agrees with Ryan, who stated in the questionnaire that beauty and aesthetics should support the spoken word, and not pit one against the other.⁴² Woodell concurred, arguing that using artistic embellishments should align with the theme or the literary context of a passage.⁴³

As with all forms of communication, preaching lies at the heart of formative and intentional uses of aesthetics, because it elicits an immediate and cumulative effect of

³⁹ Makoto Fujimura, email questionnaire, December 7, 2015.

⁴⁰ Steve Klipowicz was helpful in the designation between receptive and formative means of aesthetics. Beyond the receptive and appreciative means of formation, it is important to consider the formative means of aesthetic development. One must consider the formative impact of utilizing the congregation in creative arts and performance arts rather than just passively admiring the arts. How can the church encourage people to use their artistic gifts, become artists, and express their relationships to God in art as an aesthetical approach to formation?

⁴¹ William Dryness, email questionnaire, December 6, 2015.

⁴² Ryan, email questionnaire.

⁴³ Joseph Woodell, email questionnaire, December 9, 2015.

world-projection or world-making.⁴⁴ As argued in the first chapter, preaching as an act of verbal communication can have a powerful influence on how persons imagine and interact with God and the world. Preaching that lacks the proper influence and implementation of the aesthetic sensibilities and experiences can forfeit the development of a holistic understanding of reality needed for believers to respond to God and faithfully live the Christian life.⁴⁵ While preaching certainly holds forth what is true and good, it must be understood that beauty can powerfully disclose or radiate the truth and goodness of that which is being proclaimed. As noted in an earlier chapter, without beauty, truth tends toward unattractive historical facts, and goodness toward empty morality.

Certain realities are most powerfully manifest in language that is aesthetically adorned, because it resonates with the listener on a deeper imaginative level.⁴⁶ Ideas that are aesthetically presented do not merely inform; rather, they make one feel the truth being presented. As Carey notes, like poetry, ideas that are presented with an aesthetic nuance make one feel as well as think.⁴⁷ In this sense, ideas utilizing the aesthetic senses

⁴⁴ McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality*, 8.

⁴⁵ Concerning preaching, Lloyd-Jones argues that “. . . imagination has a real place in preaching the truth because what it does is to make the truth lively and living.” Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 235. The same is true for all of the spiritual disciplines, since humans are embodied creatures. Emotions and affections are stimulated through the successful use of sense appeal. Therefore, it may be helpful to consider the congregants as aesthetic experiencers, and even participators in beauty. Sense appeal adds a dimension to reality by helping the listener/viewer experience what is being presented. As embodied creatures, humanity’s orientation to reality often begins with experience, namely, in the senses, Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 16-21.

⁴⁶ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 136.

⁴⁷ It is important to remember the argument laid out by C. S. Lewis in an earlier chapter. Lewis made a distinction between ordinary, scientific, and poetic language, noting that one cannot treat religious (poetic) statements exactly the same way one might treat scientific statements. Lewis, *Seeing Eye*, 171-88. Lewis argued that scientific and poetic language are two different forms or projections of ordinary language. Where scientific language is concerned with describing something with a precise qualitative estimate which can be tested by an instrument, poetic language is concerned with conveying the quality of that which is being observed with imagination and emotion.

help one deeply appropriate them, grow into them, adopt them as one's own.⁴⁸ For this reason, understanding preaching as an artistic craft is helpful. Craftsmanship indicates the particular way in which an idea is communicated, since craft involves the effective usage and manipulation of means of communication. With this in mind, the interviewees offered several helpful considerations concerning the utilization of beauty and aesthetics in preaching.

First, one should consider the act of preaching as craft or art. Foundational to the practice of preaching, Fujimura pointed out that “. . . preaching is an art form.”⁴⁹ In other words, form should shape content and content should shape form. Aniol noted, “. . . preaching style affects the perception of what is being preached.”⁵⁰ Therefore, a sermon that is aesthetically nuanced can richly enhance the perception of the listener. Ryan said, “. . . preachers ought strive to preach beautiful sermons. That is, sermons that are well-crafted in terms of style, symmetry, but also aimed towards fostering and appealing to our aesthetic sensibility. In this sense, preaching should paint a compelling vision of the Christian life or enlarge one's imagination as to what is possible is sorely needed.”⁵¹ With these suggestions in mind, it is important to remember that, as Ryan noted, visual imagery [and other means of aesthetic experience] should support spoken words.⁵²

As for word choice alone, words should be approached as artistic embellishment to enhance the understanding and impact of the truth being delivered.⁵³ As Charles Spurgeon once said, preachers are “not only to instruct our hearer, and make him know

⁴⁸ John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 246.

⁴⁹ Fujimura, email questionnaire.

⁵⁰ Aniol, email questionnaire.

⁵¹ Ryan, email questionnaire.

⁵² Ryan, email questionnaire.

⁵³ Woodell, email questionnaire.

the truth, but to impress him so that he may feel it.”⁵⁴ As noted previously, Scottish preacher James Stewart argued that the aim of the preaching should be to “. . . quicken the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.”⁵⁵

For this reason, Woodell notes the value to using story and artistic verbal inflection that are consistent with the literary context of the passage to call forth the listeners’ aesthetic sensibilities. The Bible is rich with language that is artistically nuanced and with metaphor with that can be highlighted in order to draw upon the listener’s aesthetic senses. Imagine Job’s lament as a somber spoken word performance, or John’s Revelation as painted with imaginative and picturesque illustrations. One must remember that the Bible as a book is undergirded by its own aesthetic manifestation. In other words, the book that reveals the beautiful God to humanity is itself a significant literary work of art abounding with artistic beauty.⁵⁶ Biblical writers have written with an aesthetic dimension in mind, and have “. . . engaged readers to a significant degree my means of story, image, and symbol.”⁵⁷ Moreover, according to Davidson, “Not only [do] the poetry and narrative [of the Bible] exhibit aesthetical value, but also the actual vocabulary itself.”⁵⁸

Second, the interviewees noted the importance of utilizing aesthetic sensibilities and the arts as an aid to the sermon. As noted in chapter 3, God’s endorsement of such activities is foundational to humanity’s call to cultivate and create beautiful things. This

⁵⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner*, Legacy Publications (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 13.

⁵⁵ James Stewart, *Heralds of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 73.

⁵⁶ Clyde Kilby, “The Bible as a Work of Imagination,” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 105.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, 40-41.

⁵⁸ Jo Ann Davidson, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008), 151.

truth is foundational for the formative use of aesthetic embellishments in the presentation of God's Word. Horrell argued that artistic adornment could provide a powerful compliment to the sermon, "even just to embellish the message."⁵⁹ For this reason, according to Fujimura, "preachers should consider poetry, theatre and art to be a valued, and necessary, companion to their studies" and even their presentation.⁶⁰ Moreover, telling beautiful stories of Christian sacrifice and service cannot only adorn the truth, but also allows congregants to be moved deeply by their good. It should also be noted that there is a movement among worship artists to stylize biblical passages in the form of song, which can also be utilized within the sermon.⁶¹

Concerning the visual arts, Thiessen encourages the use of art as foci—namely, works that have rendered visually the specific biblical passage or theme.⁶² One way to apply this principle is to use visual imagery from the world when expositing a psalm that utilizes nature as a spiritual metaphor. This can easily be accomplished by addressing the experience of the natural world in order to call upon the aesthetic sensibilities of the congregation. One could also consider using classical paintings or performance art that captures the mood and expressions of bystanders in a scene from a narrative from Exodus.

When preaching from Luke, a drama depicting a table conversation could be utilized to evoke the appropriate emotional response from someone dining with Jesus in the Gospel account. By inviting members of the congregation to use their artistic gifts in

⁵⁹ Scott Horrell, email questionnaire, December 3, 2015. However, Horrell did caution against the use of some forms of artistic media, such as movie clips, "Media clips are getting a little old. (I don't want to waste the time in a worship service to evaluate a movie that most will never watch and almost all forget)."

⁶⁰ Fujimura, email questionnaire.

⁶¹ Notably, one could consider the contemporary work of Shane and Shane, who have stylized many of the Psalms in song form. Similarly, The Psalms Project involves a collection of artists, whose aim is to set the entire Psalter to music. Another notable example is Albert Hay Malotte's moving song rendition of the Lord's Prayer.

⁶² Thiessen, email questionnaire.

these dramatizations of the biblical passage, one also utilizes the formative power of active aesthetics. In the same way, poetry may best capture the love between the two beloved in the Song of Songs, whether performed by a member of the congregation or by the preacher. In each of these cases, an aesthetically shaped supplement can greatly enhance the message being preached. Dan Forest noted that “. . . beauty, rightly used, serves the truth of the Word. This is what God gave us beauty for, it’s hand-in-glove with Truth.”⁶³ Therefore, in preaching, one should seek to use aesthetic resources to beautify the truth and communicate it beautifully.⁶⁴

Beauty, Aesthetics, and Education

As with preaching, aesthetic education is essential for a holistic spiritual formation of the church. In human experience, rumblings occur for which we lack words.⁶⁵ Meaningful and formative encounters with beauty inevitably involve the processes of interpretation. Beauty and aesthetic experience stand as prime examples of more open-ended, less determined forms of communication, but forms of communication nonetheless.⁶⁶ For this reason, the church must be aesthetically educated rationally and emotionally in order truly to know the objective world one confronts in daily experience.⁶⁷ Concerning spiritual formation, sensory experience has a powerful role in

⁶³ Dan Forest, email questionnaire, January 6, 2016.

⁶⁴ Dan Forest is correct to note that “. . . even if a preacher isn’t artistically literate, merely valuing and affirming the ways that beauty enhances worship services can go a long ways toward shaping people’s values. Also, there may be much more literary and poetic beauty that the congregation can appreciate, even if they don’t fancy themselves artistic.”

⁶⁵ For an interesting look at the cross-pressured situation of this secular age, see Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*. In it, Smith notes that, even in this secular age, the haunting of immanence and transcendence exist in the realm of the aesthetic.

⁶⁶ McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality*, 34.

⁶⁷ In a real sense, this concerns the education of emotions. Morrissey, “Reason and Emotion,” 287; and G. Mandler, “A Constructivist Theory of Emotion,” in *Psychological and Biological Approaches to Emotion*, ed. N. S. Stein, B. L. Leventhal

the formation of a person from a cognitive, affective, and volitional level.⁶⁸ Moreover, aesthetic activities and experiences can be harnessed to direct the spiritual formation practices of the church.

The goal of Christian education is the transformation of the whole person. As stated in the first chapter, the danger of neglecting beauty and aesthetics in Christian education is that it belittles the God of creation and robs humanity of a vast terrain of human exploration. With proper education on the role of beauty and aesthetics within the Christian life, these experiences can be employed to direct the Godward spiritual formation of congregants in the church. In the questionnaire, Ryan noted that “a lack of understanding” is one of the primary reasons the church is unequipped to utilize beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation. Thiessen concurred, arguing that a “Lack of aesthetic awareness and lack of knowledge in the history of art and music” have been detrimental to the church. Moreover, “. . . such lack of awareness and education can make members in the congregation apprehensive and ‘fearful’ of the arts, especially modern art, as it may be perceived as elitist.”⁶⁹

However, as has been argued in the previous chapters, God has made beauty and aesthetic experience available to all of humanity. Therefore, “. . . Education should train all people toward full thriving, and to bring an integration point to pursue knowledge (which is both rational and intuitive).”⁷⁰ According to Makoto Fujiumura, “Training of imagination is critical for such a task.”⁷¹ Bruce Little adds, “God has created humanity to participate in and appreciate all of life and has so equipped the human mind with such categories as “beauty.” Beauty and aesthetics open the dimension of wonder of creation

and T. Trabasso (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990), 22-23.

⁶⁸ Howard, *Brazos Introduction*, 84-85.

⁶⁹ Thiessen, email questionnaire.

⁷⁰ Fujiumura, email questionnaire.

⁷¹ Fujiumura, email questionnaire.

and hence the wonder of God.”⁷² Therefore, “spiritual formation,” according to Scott Aniol, “. . . is largely about aligning our sensibilities such that we delight in the beautiful. Earthly forms of beauty can help to realign our corrupt sensibilities to apprehend and delight in ultimate Beauty.”⁷³

Aniol confirms the Edwardian belief concerning the need to discern primary and secondary beauty. Primary beauty was the true, spiritual, and divine beauty. Secondary beauty was considered subordinate, otherwise referred to as natural beauty.⁷⁴ Therefore, proper education should seek to enable the Christian to understand the difference between primary and secondary beauty, and by implication understand that one encounters secondary beauty in the antechamber of primary beauty. For this reason, aesthetic education can powerfully enrich the understanding, discernment, and aesthetic sensibilities of the congregation.

The first path toward utilizing beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation in education is integrating aesthetic experiences and art within the life of the church. As Thiessen pointed out in the questionnaire, “Beauty and the arts are a way conveying and exploring faith, imagination and spirituality. The history of art with Christian subject matter evidences this abundantly.”⁷⁵ According to Ryan, “An increased or more deliberate attending to beauty and aesthetics seems to foster the kind of openness and skillset that is needed for spiritual formation to take place.”⁷⁶ This can be accomplished with several practices. Thiessen noted, and many of the interviewees followed suit, that the church should “. . . offer courses on faith and the arts, invite artists and musicians to

⁷² Little, email questionnaire.

⁷³ Aniol, email questionnaire.

⁷⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 31.

⁷⁵ Thiessen, email questionnaire.

⁷⁶ Ryan, email questionnaire.

engage with the community and vice versa.”⁷⁷ Horrell added that churches should also offer “. . . training on how to evaluate art, music, and film.”⁷⁸

Ryan adds that this may also include “gallery tours . . . and other exposures in tandem with education that reinforces the experience.” Moreover, Wegter argued that “. . . by planning cultural excursions with a view to glorifying God, believers would have their aesthetic sensibilities expanded. In addition, they would begin to see that beauty is part of God’s big picture.”⁷⁹ L. Clifton Edwards maintained that the natural world is a rich theater for such experiences. According to Edwards,

As the psalmist says in Psalm 19:1-3, the skies and the heavens have a “voice,” and they speak “knowledge” of God to the whole world—to people of every language and culture. The beauty of the natural world is a signpost and a message from God. This statement has staggering consequences. It means that God speaks not just in the Bible—not just through his word, but also through his world.⁸⁰

In this sense, L. Clifton Edwards follows Jonathan Edwards who argued, “All beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of the Being who hath an infinite fullness and brightness of glory.”⁸¹ Edwards argued that “. . . when we are delighted with flowery meadows and gentle breezes of wind, we may consider that we only see the emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ.”⁸² As affirmed in chapter 3, it is broadly affirmed that general revelation comes to all people everywhere. This truth can be related to the general appreciation and cultivation of beauty across cultures and various religions.⁸³ In the event of creation,

⁷⁷ Thiessen, email questionnaire.

⁷⁸ Horrell, email questionnaire.

⁷⁹ Wegter, email questionnaire.

⁸⁰ L. Clifton Edwards, email questionnaire, January 18, 2016.

⁸¹ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 8, 550-51.

⁸² Edwards, *Works*, vol. 13, 278-80.

⁸³ C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 181ff.

God's infinite and transcendent beauty broke forth in a general way to be experienced in creation order.

Therefore, excursions and experiences that intentionally seek to expose and engage the church to the beauty of the natural world and the arts can be very beneficial for developing their aesthetic sensibilities.⁸⁴ These practices would allow church members to appreciate and cultivate beauty as they are experienced and "... expressed in a wide variety of cultural forms including painting, drawing, crafts, sculpture, ceramics, fashion, jewelry making, music, drama, literature, film, and photography."⁸⁵ Again, Wegter notes that, in his own ministry, he has taken "church groups, Bible studies, Christian college students, and home school academies to art museums in order to teach worldview discernment—and through that development of worldview discernment in aesthetics, to be able to enjoy beauty in a way that strengthens one's worldview while avoiding all compromise."⁸⁶

Experiences such as these can bring the congregants into closer proximity to the art forms often mentioned in the Bible, thus granting them a more holistic understanding of those passages. The clarifying focus of Scripture resolves the tension that general revelation is limited in "scope, in coherence, and in depth."⁸⁷ Therefore, if the foundation for the Christian faith is God's Word, namely the Christian canon of Scripture, then the Bible provides clarity into the meaning or purpose of beauty and aesthetic experience both in art and nature. The practices will not only help congregants experience biblical

⁸⁴ Edwards also noted a friend of his who started a church on the beaches of Mexico for this very purpose.

⁸⁵ Wegter, email questionnaire.

⁸⁶ Wegter, email questionnaire.

⁸⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2011), 152.

realities, but can also be utilized to help the church understand that “. . . the Christian life must be experienced, tasted, and lived” with proper discernment.⁸⁸

Second, and related to the first principle, church members should be, according to Aniol, “taught principles of aesthetics and how to appreciate what is truly beautiful.”⁸⁹

Wegter noted in the questionnaire,

. . . by teaching believers how to exercise discernment, whole new vistas could be opened up to them to enjoy aspects of the cultural arts and to use aesthetics to glorify and enjoy God all the more. After all, aesthetics do not ultimately belong solely in the realm of gifted artists and artisans, for God Himself is the Master Creator of beauty, and His finished work in creation is the unchanging standard for what is beautiful, true and real.⁹⁰

Woodell concurs, adding, “God is a God of beauty. He uses beauty in creation and things we make to direct attention to Himself, and simply to enjoy. Reflecting on these things as we are guided by good theological principles brings peace and joy into our lives in ways nothing else can.”⁹¹

As it relates to spiritual formation, a proper education on beauty and aesthetics could enable one to discern and understand properly the God-intended purpose for sensory pleasures, and the creative impulse that is shared by humanity. How can one fully understand the beauty of David’s Psalms without the experience of moving music? In a similar way, teaching Christians to understand and critique the art of their culture can provide a powerful bridge to apply the same missionary methods that the apostle Paul used in Areopagus in Acts 17. Moreover, encouraging congregants to cultivate the arts as world-making and world-projection activities can teach them the apologetic function of the arts as well as engage them in the formative processes of creating art.

⁸⁸ Joel R. Beeke, *Feed My Sheep* (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 97.

⁸⁹ Aniol, email questionnaire.

⁹⁰ Wegter, email questionnaire.

⁹¹ Woodell, email questionnaire.

In many ways, aesthetic education is foundational to develop a congregation's understanding and appreciation of beauty and aesthetic experiences. Following the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the divorce of transcendental realities separated beauty from the very parameters that provide its holistic meaning, namely, the good and the true. When the transcendentals are compartmentalized, beauty turns toward sentimentality, truth toward unattractive historical facts, and goodness toward empty morality. With a proper education in beauty and aesthetics, the transcendentals will be maintained, and congregations will understand that beauty discloses or radiates the truth and goodness of the reality, person, or object being perceived.⁹² Therefore, it would seem that a unified vision of the transcendentals is important for a holistic vision of beauty and its place in the spiritual formation of the church.

A proper education and experiential cultivation in beauty and aesthetics as it relates to the Christian life will allow congregants to understand, as Augustine argued, things are good, beautiful, and true because they are established in the reality of the self-revealing God.⁹³ This allows one to understand why Balthasar argued that the skeptic would never “. . . come to affirm the truth of revelation unless . . . first perceive[d] it as beautiful.”⁹⁴ As for the function of beauty in relation to the other transcendentals, Balthasar thought that beauty “clarifies the double focus of theology—on truth and goodness—because it expresses its evidence or even its visible and objective proof.”⁹⁵

⁹² John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), vii.

⁹³ Augustine further pointed out that the attainment of independent status of aesthetics, compartmentalizing it from the transcendentals, had a negative consequence of insulating it from a holistic understanding of theology. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 6-12.

⁹⁴ Edward T. Oakes, “The Apologetics of Beauty,” in *The Beauty of God*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 212.

⁹⁵ Stephan van Erp, *The Art of Theology* (Wilsele: Peeters, 2004), 55.

The proper implementation of aesthetic education and experiences help engage the congregation in receptive and formative aesthetic practices, which, in turn, beautifully proclaim the goodness and truth of their God.

Beauty, Aesthetics, and Worship

As for the discipline of Christian worship, it is important to be reminded of one of the observations pertaining to the neglect of beauty and aesthetics in the life of the church. As explained in the initial chapter, beauty and aesthetics have been avoided because of their alluring power. A deep history within Christianity leads to the neglect of beauty, because it has a strong pull that tends to lean toward idolatry. For many, beauty—instead of being used as a sign to encourage worship and devotion—has the ever-present reality of idolatry looming in the shadows, resulting in an asceticism that has no use for beauty or aesthetic experience. However, as stated before, idolatry is a problem with the human heart—not with beauty or beautiful things. Moreover, a God-centered vision of beauty displaces idolatry and positions aesthetics as a signpost for worship.

If God is beauty in its highest form, as J. Scott Horrell notes, then the “. . . worship of our Lord should express this beauty in ways consistent with Scripture and recognized aesthetically pleasing by believers, which includes expression contextualized as to culture and context.”⁹⁶ One must remember that resourcefulness was ascribed to people as beautiful traits in the Bible, and this truth applies to the artistic abilities of God’s people.⁹⁷ Regarding content and context, Aniol adds “that all artistic forms chosen for corporate worship should be chosen based upon whether they rightly reflect the beauty of God and appropriately shape the doctrinal content they carry.”⁹⁸ Michael Card

⁹⁶ Horrell, email questionnaire.

⁹⁷ Prov. 31:10-31; also 1 Tim. 2:9-10 and 1 Pet. 3:3-5

⁹⁸ Aniol, email questionnaire.

noted that “. . . worship is the appropriate response to the beauty of God. As for the role of beauty in worship, the beauty of God’s presence can be recognized, reflected in the beauty of the worship.”⁹⁹

Among the spiritual disciplines explored in this thesis-project, the practice of worship is arguably the most formative when it comes to aesthetic sensibilities. Even apart from the Bible, Luther proclaimed music as a “wonderful creation and gift from God.”¹⁰⁰ In fact, Luther went as far as to say that, except for theology, nothing could be more closely connected with the Word of God than is music.¹⁰¹

The relationship between [sensory perception] and [spiritual disciplines] is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in regular experiences of worship. Highly structured or highly improvisatory, celebrative or somber, iconic, aniconic, hymns, chants, choruses, or mixed variety, all of these and more conspire to explicitly or implicitly communicate truth claims about the divine.¹⁰²

The experience of a worship gathering has the immersive effect of capturing the aesthetic imaginations of its participants.¹⁰³ As demonstrated in the first chapter, not only does worship strengthen, deepen, and develop understanding of God, but it can also help people understand and respond to the beauty in the world around them. In this sense, corporate worship settings provide a welcoming space for both receptive and formative aesthetic practices.

⁹⁹ Michael Card, *Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2004), 32.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Luther, quoted in Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 25.

¹⁰¹ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 25.

¹⁰² McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality*, 49.

¹⁰³ As noted earlier, for many people, beauty—instead of being used as a sign to encourage worship and devotion, has the ever-present reality of idolatry looming in the shadows, resulting in an asceticism that has no use for beauty or aesthetic experience. However, idolatry is a problem with the human heart, not with beauty or beautiful things. Moreover, a God-centered vision of beauty displaces idolatry and positions aesthetics as a signpost for worship.

Music does not only charm the senses, but also captivates the mind and strikes the heart.¹⁰⁴ In this sense, music has the ability to symbolize certain feelings in a direct manner. This symbolism seems to be governed by a complex series of associations of sounds and rhythms with natural bodily functions (faster or slower heartbeat), the intrinsic limitations on hearing (loud or soft) as well as a certain degree of association with human sounds (weeping, sighing, laughing) or those with nature (the waters, the wind, etc.).¹⁰⁵ In this sense, beauty and aesthetics can be utilized in worship gatherings to deeply stir the affections of the participants as they draw their attention toward God. For this reason, it can be helpful to allow “. . . creativity to flourish and utilize aesthetic sensitivity in order to draw worshipers into a receptive and formative sphere of life and spirituality that a purely rational approach cannot achieve.”¹⁰⁶

First, intentional use of beauty and aesthetics in worship gatherings should consider the worship environment as formative. William Dyrness noted in the questionnaire that the Old Testament “. . . temple and experience of worship was designed to be a beautiful place and activity.”¹⁰⁷ In some worship spaces, according to Joseph Woodell, the architecture itself “points to God’s majesty, just as artwork tells stories and music tells truth.”¹⁰⁸ Of note is that local congregations gather in different types of architectural buildings. However, the aesthetic design, embellishment, and even use of iconography in any type of room can be utilized to set the space apart as a worship

¹⁰⁴ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 38.

¹⁰⁵ Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 39.

¹⁰⁶ Dennis P. Hollinger, *Head, Heart, and Hands* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005), 135.

¹⁰⁷ William Dyrness noted that he regularly visits the website for the Calvin Institute of Christian worship, which has many examples of the good use of the arts for intentional use of beauty and aesthetics in worship gatherings. Dyrness, email questionnaire.

¹⁰⁸ Woodell, email questionnaire.

environment that evokes a beautiful transcendental experience.¹⁰⁹ Thiessen remarked that one way to accomplish this is to “encourage good taste in church interior furnishings. This must not always be expensive. Some candles, real flowers, and art work produced by children are more beautiful, tasteful and cheaper than garish banners, elaborate garish lights.”¹¹⁰

Second, several of the interviewees mentioned the use of liturgy in the worship service as an intentional way to utilize beauty and aesthetics in worship. Aniol argued that “taking note of the aesthetic aspects of corporate worship is essential in this regard,” especially in considering the “aesthetic qualities of liturgy.”¹¹¹ According to Brian Zahnd, a renewed emphasis in liturgy is important in this discussion.¹¹² Additionally, Horrell mentioned that, of the churches that encourage artistic expression, the highly liturgical churches seemed to do this the best.¹¹³ Perhaps, the reasons behind this correlation relate to the liturgical framework of a gathering to plan appropriately, intentionally, and easily for a variety of songs with a different emotional cadence, and place aesthetic elements and the arts within the pattern of the worship service to contribute to the overall experience and ensure that everyone in the gathering—regardless of their emotional states, receives ministry.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the liturgical pattern allows a framework to execute proper employment of the various artistic gifts of the congregation, for the

¹⁰⁹ Brian Zahnd mentioned the renewed emphasis on iconography in his email questionnaire.

¹¹⁰ Thiessen, email questionnaire.

¹¹¹ Aniol, email questionnaire.

¹¹² Brian Zahnd, email questionnaire, December 3, 2015.

¹¹³ Horrell, email questionnaire.

¹¹⁴ For more on the importance of liturgical patterns of worship and how they shape the spiritual formation of the people, see Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*. For a more popular level treatment on the topic, see Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace*.

artists' formative use of aesthetics, and the congregation's receptive and appreciative sphere of aesthetics.

To note the power of the ordinances or sacraments as it relates to the role of beauty and aesthetics in spiritual formation is also important. The Lord's Table and baptism are signs and actions that are full of potential when it comes to capturing the hearts of participants as they reflect on the Good News of the Gospel. Unfortunately, the Zwinglian influence of these practices has led many congregations to an experience that is either bland, trite, or has no aesthetic sense at all.¹¹⁵ However, these ordinances can be viewed as a beautiful means of grace when exercised in faith. John Hammett argues that as “. . . sense-bound creatures, it is helpful to us to have a concrete experience that makes faith visible and allows us to externally symbolize what happened internally. God offers us a place to externalize or formalize or confirm what happened in our heart in giving us” both baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹¹⁶

As mentioned above, a third way of aesthetic formation allows churches to consider the use of various art forms as expressions of worship in the church gathering. Makoto Fujimura noted that, in worship, one brings their “creativity and imagination to align with God's vision for the world and our transformation. As such, the process of transformation is always tied to beauty.”¹¹⁷ For Card, the call to creativity is a call to worship. In worship, a space for response is created in time, space of awe and stillness in the noise, confusion, and business of everyday life.¹¹⁸ Card noted, “. . . emphasizing quality musicianship and lyric writing are vital to the intentional use of beauty in

¹¹⁵ Particularly in the Baptist tradition, a revalidation of the spiritual nature of such practices occurred, as evidenced in the publication of Anthony Cross and Philip Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism: Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

¹¹⁶ John Hammett, *40 Questions on Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2015), 156.

¹¹⁷ Fujimura, email questionnaire.

¹¹⁸ Card, *Scribbling in the Sand*, 16.

worship. Since worship is always a response to God, beautiful music and lyrics can aid in that response.”¹¹⁹

Thiessen recommended that one “invite members in congregations who play instruments as well as music college students training to be professional musicians to contribute playing short pieces during a service.”¹²⁰ Moreover, by allowing creativity to flourish in worship settings, the artists in the congregation are invited to engage in the formative task of aesthetics with their gifts. Again, understanding the relationship between beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation would aid Christians in seeing the purpose and benefit of beauty in everyday life.

One could consider inviting a visual artist to create a work during the service, though this could be powerful in any gathering; consider how it could greatly enhance a service when the songs and message focus on the creation accounts of Genesis. Similarly, Card writes,

If what we create, write, dance or sing can open up such a space in time through which God may speak, imagine the possibilities. Painting might be a window through which the confused world looks and sees the sane order of God’s creation. Music could become an orchestrated echo of the voice the tired ears of humankind have longed for ages to heard.¹²¹

For a church, taking note of the receptive and formative aesthetic aspects of corporate worship is essential in this regard. A church that considers the aesthetic qualities of its architecture, music, liturgy, and preaching will be better-suited to the spiritual formation of its congregation than a church that sees aesthetics as merely ancillary. Aniol wisely stated,

I think the primary barrier is that most people believe that when it comes to the arts and cultural expressions in worship, the primary criterion is to choose what the people prefer. They do not recognize that people’s preferences may be corrupt and in need of formation. They do not understand that the purpose of the arts in corporate worship is not merely expression; rather the purpose of the arts is

¹¹⁹ Michael Card, email questionnaire, September 23, 2015.

¹²⁰ Thiessen, email questionnaire.

¹²¹ Card, *Scribbling in the Sand*, 17.

formative.¹²²

For this reason, integrating beauty and aesthetics in worship can be a powerful tool in the spiritual formation of the congregation to “. . . more fully engage the entire person and draw people in to the power of aesthetic beauty.”¹²³ In this sense, the worship experience can be utilized as other forms of art to provide a “. . . significant analogy to the creator of all.”¹²⁴

Beauty, Aesthetics, and Service

The spiritual formation practice of Christian service is also an important aspect of integrating beauty and aesthetics into the life of a congregation. As argued in chapter 3, believers are called to live in a manner that will make the teaching of the Lord beautiful and attractive before unbelievers.¹²⁵ In the questionnaires, Christian service was delineated in two ways—good deeds as beautifully adorning the message of Christianity and the exhibition and creation of art for the good of the community at-large. These practices of service are tangible ways of demonstrating the power of beauty in the Christian life for a receptive audience. Foundational to this truth is the idea that “. . . a community’s beliefs become more credible to them as they engage in practices congruent with those beliefs.”¹²⁶ From the perspective of those outside the church, the beauty of Christian service is admired because of its goodness and its benefit of seeking the welfare

¹²² Aniol, email questionnaire.

¹²³ Forest, email questionnaire.

¹²⁴ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 253.

¹²⁵ Titus 2:10

¹²⁶ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Attending to the Gaps Between Beliefs and Practices,” in *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Wolf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 36-37.

of others.¹²⁷ As Wooddell noted, “We love and admire something because it is good or useful.”¹²⁸ In this sense, both beautiful deeds and aesthetically pleasing creations can powerfully contribute to the church’s witness.

As stated in the first chapter, Christian service, or an aesthetic lifestyle, adorns the Good News of the Gospel by complimenting and reinforcing believers’ words with good deeds, correspondingly directing praise to God as a result. Without perceiving the beauty of the Christian ethic, the vision of the service of the church can feel cold and uninspiring—a duty rather than a delight. A vision of Christian service beautifully adorning and attesting to the word being proclaimed can provide a powerful formative catalyst of sacrifice for others. Makoto Fujimura noted, “We serve to glorify God. Moreover, beautiful mercy is a signature of a true Christian service. Our communities should be seen by the outsiders as a beautiful art work of God.”¹²⁹ According to Joseph Woodell, churches should seek “. . . creative ways of thinking about bringing people into an encounter with the beauty of individual Christian lives as well as the beauty of the body of Christ.”¹³⁰

The rise toward utilitarianism in modern life has resulted in little use for beauty and reflective aesthetic experience. The obsession with functionality has belittled anything that is not “. . . directly useful in mastering the physical life.”¹³¹ In this sense, an aesthetic lifestyle is a powerful example of the beauty of the Christian life and tantamount to virtue formation in the life of the participant. As referenced before,

¹²⁷ This idea is found in Jer. 27:9. A good resource for exploring this concept of being a faithful presence in the public square is James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹²⁸ Woodell, email questionnaire.

¹²⁹ Fujimura, email questionnaire.

¹³⁰ Woodell, email questionnaire.

¹³¹ Leland Ryken, *Culture in Christian Perspective: A Door to Understanding and Enjoying the Arts*, Critical Concern Book (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), 74.

Hollinger notes, “. . . [beauty] has a powerful way of sensitizing us to the simple and natural things of life and a way of refreshing our inward selves.”¹³²

The message of the good Samaritan is more impressively understood in the context where the church is meeting the needs of the poor and outcast. God’s love for the neglected is more tangibly understood in a church that cares for widows. The theological truth that Christians are sons and daughters of the Most High is greater understood within a church that children who were once orphans have been adopted and integrated into the families of the church and, thus, into the church family at-large. As Joseph Woodell noted in the questionnaire, the message of Christianity can and should be packaged beautifully, both in how believers speak and how they live.¹³³ Moreover, the very practice of the aesthetic lifestyle has a formative effect on the sanctification of the church. As argued in chapter 3, moral beautification of the believer happens through the application of the Word, and is accomplished through the work of the Spirit.¹³⁴

As for the use of the arts, Horrell noted that churches should value and also do art in the service of the culture.¹³⁵ Ryan adds that churches could adopt an artist in the same way that some adopt a missionary on furlough. In other words, “provide an artist with space and resources while allowing them to teach the church about what they are creating and why they are creating it.”¹³⁶ Moreover, “churches could host local art showings.”¹³⁷ Historically, the church was once the center for the flourishing of the arts. According to Hans Rookmaaker, the arts held an important place in the life of the church before the

¹³² Hollinger, *Head, Heart, and Hands*, 135.

¹³³ Woodell, email questionnaire.

¹³⁴ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 163.

¹³⁵ Horrell, email questionnaire.

¹³⁶ Gesa Thiessen noted that the churches mentioned in the *Arts and Christian Enquiry Journal* in Britain are a good example of congregations that organize exhibitions of contemporary art.

¹³⁷ Ryan, email questionnaire.

eighteenth century. Before then, the arts were cultivated in everyday life and the artist was considered a craftsman. Before the enlightenment, artists like Handel with his Messiah, Bach with his Matthew Passion, Rembrandt with his Denial of St. Peter, and the architects of churches flourished, practicing their craft to the glory of God. And many of their works were not only commissioned by the church, but were exhibited within the church. However, after the enlightenment, art was “. . . lifted out of daily reality and placed in its own temple, the museum.”¹³⁸

Thankfully a movement is occurring to reintegrate the arts back into life of the church at-large. One example of an art exhibition is Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, which often hosts opera and classical music (west side congregation). Additionally, Chichester Cathedral in Europe, who often hosts exhibitions of art within their buildings. In Germany, there are also many such undertakings, one of the best-known being Kunststation in Cologne. Makato Fujimura points to Seibo Church in Chiba, Japan, a small church plant that incorporates art, gourmet cooking, and a Japanese sense of beauty into everything they do. L. Clifton Edwards notes that churches that engage in environmental projects to beautify their community attest to the value of God’s good creation and humanity’s mandate to cultivate the earth. It has been noted that the arts and natural theology have a long and conspicuous history within Christianity.¹³⁹

As argued previously in this thesis-project, both the arts and the natural world can be powerful portals through which humans experience the glory of God. Moreover, these personal experiences with the beautiful can evoke a tangible longing for God. For this reason, these experiences must be harnessed to direct the spiritual formation practices of the church. The theological trajectory of such practices is rooted in the eschatological hope of the world to come. While sin has dark implications for humanity here and now, a

¹³⁸ Hans Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* (Berkeley, CA: Regent, 1978), 16.

¹³⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 180-85.

day is coming when the beauty of God will be clearly seen and delighted in by all of creation. Once again, Romans 8 reminds Christians that they are “. . . poised between creation and new creation.”¹⁴⁰ The current world groans in travail, waiting to give birth to the world to come. Creation order is good, it is beautiful, but its beauty is at present transient.¹⁴¹ The aesthetic lifestyle of Christians, expressed in their service in the world, gives a tangible demonstration of the coming Kingdom of God. With this in mind, it should hardly surprise one that beauty plays such an important role in the Bible’s eschatological trajectory.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the practical applications and solutions in the context of the spiritual formation practices of Christian preaching, teaching, worship, and service. Once again, the goal of this project has not only been to assess the value of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices of spiritual formation, but also to provide practical examples of how this integration can be achieved. Throughout this chapter, the aim has been to show how these specific spiritual formation practices can develop a congregation’s aesthetic sensibilities by bringing people intentionally into aesthetic experiences. In questioning field experts on beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation, the objective of the research was to identify resources, examples, and best practices that would help frame the practical and theological implications of the research. The chapter has provided a synthesis evaluation in order to bring together all the data collected in the questionnaire and research from previous chapters, as a way forward in this important ecclesiological conversation.

¹⁴⁰ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 222.

¹⁴¹ Rom. 8:20-22

In the questionnaire, William Dyrness argued that all these practices—preaching, education, worship, and service—could intentionally use and cultivate visual and aural dimensions that spark delight and joy in people and that can lead them to God.¹⁴² However, as Kevin Bauder added, “This will take patience, explanation, teaching, and exposure.”¹⁴³ Once again, aesthetics is about taste, or forming a criticism of taste, especially pertaining to that which is beautiful.¹⁴⁴ Seemingly, intentionality is key in the process of developing a church that is aesthetically healthy. Ryan noted that “ongoing formation should routinely include exposure to the arts and the integration of beauty into every area of life and ministry.”¹⁴⁵ In this sense, church leaders should follow the example of Horrell, who has integrated “both music and visual arts directly into every class and nearly every message.” Similarly, church leader and painter Wegter consistently “uses visual arts to illustrate the truths of Scripture in order to touch the human hunger for aesthetics.” Wegter notes that he has “not seen much in a way of successful integration in this area,” which means much is still to be done.¹⁴⁶

Begbie is correct in arguing that beauty, aesthetics, and the arts can illuminate the purposes of God in creation and redemption as acts of communication.¹⁴⁷ Thus, while individual Christians need God’s Spirit within them, and God’s Word in front of them to interpret and appreciate the beauty around them, they also need the church to lead them in

¹⁴² Dyrness, email questionnaire.

¹⁴³ Bauder, email questionnaire.

¹⁴⁴ Larry Woiwode, *Words for Readers and Writers* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2013), 183.

¹⁴⁵ Mark Ryan also mentioned Warehouse 242, a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, that has sought to integrate the arts into every aspect of the church’s life.

¹⁴⁶ One notable exception is the annual gathering of the Via Affirmativa initiative, from the Navigators. This is a network of Christians who affirm the value and unique calling of artists and champions of art who have encountered God’s presence. Additionally, Kevin Bauder noted that Religious Affections Ministries is developing useful resources in this area.

¹⁴⁷ Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise* (New York: T&T Clark, 1991), 220.

the intentional cultivation of their aesthetic sensibilities. These sensibilities should be cultivated with a God-centered focus. God is a beautiful God, which is clear from his handiwork in creation, in His word, and in Jesus Christ who perfectly images the Father to humans.

In this sense, Christ is the mediator between primary and secondary beauties, to use the words of Edwards. Moreover, Christ is the fulcrum of beauty in human experience. Just as affirmed by Christian history, Augustine demonstrated that God brought divine beauty to humanity, which is most fully manifest in Jesus Christ. In the Son, the whole bursts forth, allowing God's beauty to be most present and perceptible for humanity. In the same way, Aquinas maintained that the perfect reflection of the Father's beauty is seen in Christ. Moreover, Edwards upheld that Jesus Christ embodies, as the God-man, all that which the Godhead consents as beautiful.

Last, Balthasar's theory of divine beauty was centered on God's love as shown in Jesus Christ. As demonstrated in chapter 2, God journeys from himself toward His people in Christ, and at the same time it is possible for the church to journey away from self toward their God through Christ. Moreover, only the saving grace of God's Spirit enables man to apprehend divine beauty.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, the particular role that the Spirit plays within creation is that of communicating the beauty of God to the world.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, beauty and aesthetics cannot be removed from spiritual formation, for they are grounded in the objective reality of the God of the Bible, most fully experienced in Jesus Christ, and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Christians understand more than anyone else that beauty is not found in the eye of the beholder, but rather in the God who is beheld.

For this reason, it is vitally important that all of the means explored in this chapter are centered and filtered through the Word of God, since it is impossible to understand beauty and aesthetic experience properly without the clarifying focus of divine

¹⁴⁸ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 5, 50.

¹⁴⁹ Edwards, *Unpublished Essay of Edwards*, 97-102.

revelation.¹⁵⁰ As Gaebelein observed, “. . . [The Bible’s] basic insights must provide not only the foundation for an authentic Christian aesthetic but also the corrective for the artistic theory derived from other sources, however excellent they must be.”¹⁵¹

For Protestant Christians, special revelation “. . . stands apart as the fundamental epistemological axiom of Christianity.”¹⁵² In this sense, the experience of beauty should be viewed as a “. . . significant analogy to the creator of all.”¹⁵³ In other words, God’s Word is the source of truth by which a Christian values and critiques beauty, and it is also instrumental for developing a Christian aesthetic. In preaching, teaching, worship, and service, the Bible is foundational to defining and expressing the church’s concept of beauty and shaping the use of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation. Therefore, as spiritual formation practices aim at aiding the Christian in the apprehension of God’s beauty, the splendor of God transfigures humankind so that, through the gift of His Spirit, one not only sees His beauty, but also becomes beautiful.

Finally, as the beauty of God is depicted in preaching and education, the believer is not only evoked to worship, but also to reflect that beauty in Christian service. It has been said, “Sound theology leads always to the love of beauty. When there is no love of beauty . . . there is no sound theology.”¹⁵⁴ This theological perspective on beauty and aesthetics necessitates that it is not so much an option as it is a necessity for the spiritual formation of the church. God alone is the one who satisfies humanity’s deepest yearning

¹⁵⁰ Moreover, there must be rational beings capable of apprehending God’s revelation of beauty.

¹⁵¹ Frank Gaebelein, *The Christian, the Arts and Truth* (Portland: Multnomah, 1985), 56.

¹⁵² Gregory Thornbury, *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 53.

¹⁵³ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 253.

¹⁵⁴ Douglas Jones and Douglas Wilson, *Angels in the Architecture* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1998), 24.

for beauty.¹⁵⁵ These truths are applicable to the practices of education, worship, and service for a variety of reasons. As noted throughout this thesis-project, appealing to aesthetic experiences has a powerful impact on spiritual transformation. As the body of Christ, believers are the embodiment of the divine life in the world. Therefore, the spiritual practices that integrate beauty and aesthetics are beneficial for spiritual formation in the life of a Protestant evangelical congregation.

¹⁵⁵ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 138.

CHAPTER 6

THESIS-PROJECT RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Introduction

Thus far, this study has shown the historical precedent for, the theological framework for, and practical examples of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations. In the first chapter, the general agreement among theologians and Christian leaders was established, namely, that beauty and aesthetics have been neglected in both theology and practice concerning the spiritual formation of the Protestant evangelical congregations. While the modern Christian tradition on beauty and aesthetics varies from murmur to roar, notable voices in church history have substantially contributed to the trajectory of the discussion on theological aesthetics. Therefore, in chapter 2, it was illustrated that a rich history of Christian thought is related to these subjects as illustrated in the works of the most formative thinkers, namely, Saint Augustine, Saint Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards, and Hans Urs Von Balthasar. Moreover, as demonstrated in chapter 3, beauty and aesthetics are subjects readily addressed in biblical texts and within a systematic theology framework. The argument in all of these chapters is that the neglect of beauty and aesthetics can have a negative outcome on the holistic spiritual formation of the church. Once again, the thesis examined in this work is that spiritual practices that integrate beauty and aesthetics are beneficial for spiritual formation in the life of a Protestant evangelical congregation.¹

¹ The philosophical foundations for this truth claim have been highly influenced by the works of James K. A. Smith. Smith's books *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom* are helpful in this regard.

The goal of this project is to assess the value of, and argue for the benefit of, integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices of spiritual formation, with the primary areas of spiritual formation centered on the practices of preaching, education, worship, and service. In the previous chapter, this work has sought to develop a framework for a disciplined inquiry to ministry as it relates to beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation. This framework was developed using a questionnaire with leading voices in the church on this particular subject. In this last chapter, implications and practical applications for utilizing beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation of a congregation will be explored with local congregations, pastors, and seminary professors in mind.

The Task of Practical Theology

As noted in the last chapter, practical theology involves the “. . . task of forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable.”² Practical theology “. . . engages in and examines actions that seek to achieve particular ends.”³ Moreover, the outcome of practical theology seeks to offer models and practices that bring about those ends. These models and practices “. . . offer leaders a general picture of the field in which they are acting and ways that might shape this field towards desired goals.”⁴

Richard Osmer has been instrumental in formalizing the field of practical theology. Osmer’s work, titled *Practical Theology*, framed the task of the practical theologian with four questions. These questions have been used throughout this chapter to guide the implications and practical applications for utilizing beauty and aesthetics in the spiritual formation of a congregation. The first question addresses the descriptive-empirical task by asking, “What is going on?” The second question focuses on the

² Richard S. Osmer, *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008). 176.

³ Ryan S. Anderson, “Practical Theology,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. VanHoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 614.

⁴ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 176.

interpretive task of digging deeper to find out “Why is it going on?” The third question helps cast a vision for “What ought to be going on?” by addressing the normative task of the practical theologian. The fourth and last question aim to provide information related to the pragmatic task by asking, “How might we respond?” Answering these four intentional questions not only offers a vision for the desired future, but also shapes strategies that influence the professor, pastor, and congregation’s goal or desired end.⁵

A Word to Christians and Congregations

Christians affirm that all humans are created in the image of God. Moreover, the Bible is clear that as God completed each portion of the created world, He declared that it is good. These beliefs are foundational to the truth that beauty and aesthetics are not only unavoidable in everyday life, but also can be utilized for one’s spiritual formation. Therefore, individual Christians and congregations need to understand the receptive and formative roles of beauty and aesthetics for their spiritual formation. However, as has been demonstrated throughout this thesis-project, beauty and aesthetics have been neglected in the receptive and formative aspects of the Christian life, and thus in the spiritual formation of congregations. These truth claims lead to the question, what ought to be happening? The answer is simple—both Christians and congregations ought to utilize the receptive and formative roles of beauty and aesthetics for their spiritual formation.

As noted earlier, “There is something intrinsic to humanity that is drawn to beauty.”⁶ In fact, of all living creatures in God’s good creation, humanity is uniquely equipped to recognize and appreciate beauty and aesthetic experiences. Undeniably, humans have a sense of beauty and seem to recognize it intuitively when seen. Therefore, the practice of aesthetics is the responsibility of every person, especially those who call

⁵ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 183.

⁶ R. Albert Mohler, *The Disappearance of God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2009). 47.

themselves Christians. In other words, no way exists to escape the aesthetic task in a manner that is distinctively Christian.⁷ Therefore, beauty and aesthetics are tantamount to a holistic understanding of human experience and knowledge from a Christian perspective.⁸ Humanity's capacity to behold the beauty of God is intrinsically related to God's purposes in creation.

One has to understand that humanity's creation in the image of God provides the theological grounding for human ability for aesthetic delight and for creative capacities and imagination. As Seerveld wrote, beautiful things and aesthetic experience are “. . . the rainbows God made for a fallen world.”⁹ Moreover, the powerful aesthetic encounter reaches deeply within humanity, seeps into the core of their beings, and draws humanity to press further into the nature of that beauty, ultimately beholding the object of beauty—the God of the universe. These truths can be utilized to help the church understand that “. . . the Christian life must be experienced, tasted, and lived” with proper discernment.¹⁰

Since “. . . congregations are to be characterized by relationships of mutual care and service, which build up the body,” individuals within the congregation not only need to appreciate the formative and receptive role of aesthetic experiences, but also encourage the cultivation of such things.¹¹ In a receptive sense, the church is a “. . . contrast society and . . . a catalyst of social transformation” to the watching world.¹² Olson notes that as “. . . a contrast society, they serve as a sign and witness to God's royal rule in the form of a

⁷ Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence, 1980).

⁸ The most helpful popular treatments on the topics of beauty and aesthetics can be found in Steve DeWhitt, *Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything* (Grand Rapids: Credo, 2012); and Jerram Barrs, *Echoes of Eden* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

⁹ Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World*, 8.

¹⁰ Joel R. Beeke, *Feed My Sheep* (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 97.

¹¹ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 189.

¹² Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 191.

servant. As a catalyst of social transformation, they serve as a sign and witness to the possibilities of new creation.”¹³

Therefore, one will ask, how might the church respond? Understanding humanity’s unique capacity to appreciate and cultivate beauty should encourage the church to express a wide variety of aesthetic experiences and activities like painting, drawing, crafts, sculpture, ceramics, fashion, jewelry-making, music, drama, literature, film, and photography.¹⁴ The practices will not only help congregants experience biblical realities, but can also be utilized to help the church understand that “. . . the Christian life must be experienced, tasted, and lived.”¹⁵

Moreover, encouraging fellow congregants to cultivate the arts as world-making and world-projection activities can teach them the apologetic function of the arts as well as engage them in the formative process of creating art. Christians with artistic gifts should work with church leadership and among congregants to encourage the use of, and contribute to, the aesthetic health of the church. Teaching courses, leading workshops, and using artistic abilities to adorn the church gathering space are legitimate avenues of service that contribute to the spiritual formation of the congregation. Moreover, participating in the arts in the surrounding community allow one’s Christian witness to take aesthetic forms, and can be a powerful apologetic for the Christian worldview. In this sense, appreciating, cultivating, and participating in the arts affirms their place in the Christian life, but also provides venues and bridges to interact with those outside of the Christian faith.

A Word to Local Church Pastors

If the subjects of beauty and aesthetics are being neglected in the spiritual formation practices of the church, pastors must ask, what is happening? It is not a stretch

¹³ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 191-92.

¹⁴ Wegter, email questionnaire.

¹⁵ Beeke, *Feed My Sheep*, 97.

to propose that congregations rarely experience the intentional use of receptive and formative aesthetics as it relates to spiritual formation. As stated in the previous chapters, foundational to this study is the belief that aesthetic experience has a powerful role in the formation of a person from cognitive, affective, and volitional levels.¹⁶ As many of the interviewees noted, holistic formation must move beyond the faculties of rational cognition, and integrate sensory and experiential means of spiritual development.¹⁷ With this in mind, local church pastors must understand that aesthetic experience can advance understanding in two ways: shaping the mind through progressions of thought and expanding perception through experience.¹⁸

Aesthetic experience is a viable means of spiritual development of the congregation, in that it helps form one's knowing and understanding as well as of sensual delight related to God and the Christian life.¹⁹ Just like any other discipline, spiritual formation has a goal-oriented aim in spirituality or progressive change in character. Why is this occurring? Simply put, beauty and aesthetics have been neglected in the life of the church as part of the holistic spiritual formation of congregations. However, it is clear that the Bible gives an extensive vocabulary for expressing the concept of beauty.²⁰ Moreover, it has been argued that “. . . beauty is a category indispensable to Christian

¹⁶ James K. A. Smith has published a popular level treatment on the formative power of spiritual practices titled *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016).

¹⁷ This also includes the emotions. In fact, Morrissey notes the infamous dualism between reason and emotion, and how that has obscured formation. In too many cases “. . . reason is reduced to an abstract rationalism and emotion is identified with irrational passions.” Morrissey, “Reason and Emotion,” 275. However, as Elliott argues, reason and emotion are interdependent. Elliott, *Faithful Feelings*, 47.

¹⁸ Gordon Graham, “Learning from Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35, no. 1 (1995): 26-37.

¹⁹ James McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 21.

²⁰ Two popular level works that are helpful in this area are Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* and Phillip Graham Ryken, *Art for God's Sake: A Call to Recover the Arts* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006).

thought.”²¹ Therefore, local church pastors must understand that, in many ways, one’s theological foundation concerning beauty and aesthetics provides the Christian explanation needed and sets the trajectory for the practices related to spiritual formation. Thus, pastors should ask, what ought to be happening?

Congregations ought to experience the receptive and formative role of beauty and aesthetics for their spiritual formation. As demonstrated throughout this thesis-project, beauty and aesthetics are instrumental in the holistic formation of Christian persons. If practices are instrumental in forming one’s spirituality over time, pastors should be integrating beauty and aesthetics into the life of the church. Now, as Augustine has argued, proper discernment of beauty is vital to understanding the object that aesthetically delights. Thus, it would seem that the existential reality of beauty has a particular role in spiritual formation, namely, in helping Christians understand and experience God, as well as understand and enjoy God’s creation. In light of this truth, pastors should “. . . strive to make the congregation a place where the needs of the people are met in return for their support and participation.”²² Therefore, pastors must ask how they might respond.

First, pastors must consider that while preaching certainly holds forth what is true and good, it must be understood that beauty can powerfully disclose or radiate the truth and goodness of that which is being proclaimed. Meaningful and formative encounters engaging the aesthetic sense can have a powerful role in striking the imagination and stirring the affections. Therefore, one must consider how God’s truth might be mediated through encounters with beauty and the arts. This consideration first starts with the sermon itself. One of the ways that pastors can utilize beauty is by crafting the sermon aesthetically by using adorned language to capture the imaginations of the congregants. The goal here is to guide the congregation in feeling the truth being presented by

²¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 16.

²² Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 194.

allowing the form of the biblical content to shape the content of the sermon. In other words, the preacher should be mindful of how the verbal inflection, poetic words, and well-crafted sermon structures can enhance the overall experience of listening to the sermon. As for application, one should consider how using word images and stories of the truth applied could powerfully motivate the congregation to reflect the truth in their own lives. Additionally, pastors must consider how artistic elements like music, visual imagery, paintings, and even drama can be utilized in the sermon to adorn the message aesthetically and support the communication of the text.

Second, most pastors would agree that the goal of Christian education is the transformation of the whole person. Therefore, excursions and experiences that intentionally seek to expose and engage the church to the beauty of the natural world and the arts can be very beneficial for developing their aesthetic sensibilities.²³ When it comes to planning the overall education curriculum, and even the experience of each class session, one might consider how aesthetic elements could be utilized to imprint the lesson deeply on the hearts of the students. Knowledge and experience of beauty in nature and the arts can be instrumental in forming one's biblical understanding of the world and how they interact with God's world.²⁴

Moreover, teaching a congregation principles of aesthetics like discerning primary and secondary beauty will equip them to make a proper assessment and experience the beauty around them in day-to-day life. Integrating beauty into the education ministry of the church could easily begin with utilizing pieces of art and music in the classroom. In addition, the church could host artists, art showings, and music and drama performances in their space as a way not only to affirm the value of the arts, but also to bring their people into contact with such experiences. Moreover, planning educational and cultural

²³ Edwards also noted a friend of his who started a church on the beaches of Mexico for this very purpose.

²⁴ W. David O. Taylor's edited work *For the Beauty of the Church* is a helpful volume in this area.

excursions in nature and in arts venues can be a powerful way to encourage the church to interact with the beauty around them.

Encouraging the artists in the congregation to use their gifts to adorn the church gathering place or perform music and drama is an important endeavor to encourage the formative aspect of aesthetics for spiritual development. A proper education and experiential cultivation in beauty and aesthetics as it relates to the Christian life will allow congregants to understand, as Augustine argued, that things are good, beautiful, and true because they are established in the reality of the self-revealing God.²⁵

Third, concerning worship practices, local church pastors need to remember the words of Michael Card, who stated, “. . . worship is the appropriate response to the beauty of God. As for the role of beauty in worship, the beauty of God’s presence can be recognized, reflected in the beauty of the worship.”²⁶ In this sense, the experience of a worship gathering has the immersive effect of capturing the aesthetic imaginations of its participants.²⁷ As stated in the previous chapter, music does not only charm the senses, but also captivates the mind and strikes the heart.²⁸ This truth requires pastors to consider the receptive and formative power of worship in a holistic way. The intentional use of

²⁵ Again, it is important to note that Augustine pointed out that the attainment of independent status of aesthetics, compartmentalizing it from the transcendentals, had a negative consequence of insulating it from a holistic understanding of theology. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 6-12.

²⁶ Michael Card, *Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2004), 32.

²⁷ As noted earlier, for many people, instead of being used as a sign to encourage worship and devotion, beauty has the ever-present reality of idolatry looming in the shadows, resulting in an asceticism that has no use for beauty or aesthetic experience. However, idolatry is a problem with the human heart, not with beauty or beautiful things. Moreover, a God-centered vision of beauty displaces idolatry and positions aesthetics as a signpost for worship.

²⁸ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 38.

beauty and aesthetics in worship gatherings should consider even the worship environment as formative.²⁹

The adornments, symbols, and sensory elements of a worship space not only form how the congregation worships, but also the congregation's posture in worship. For this reason, an aesthetically developed formation strategy allows churches to consider the use of various art forms as expressions of worship in the church gathering. Moreover, by allowing creativity to flourish in worship settings the artists in the congregation are invited to engage in the formative task of aesthetics with their gifts. Encouraging and allowing artists to use their gifts in worship settings can be a powerful tool in the formation of the artist, but can also have a powerful impact on the congregation as a whole.

Fourth, local church pastors must remember that believers are called to live in a manner that will make the teaching of the Lord beautiful and attractive before unbelievers.³⁰ Christian service should be understood in at least two ways. From a receptive perspective, good deeds beautifully adorn the spoken message of Christianity. From a formative perspective, the exhibition and creation of art is for the good of the artist and the community at large. Both beautiful deeds and aesthetically pleasing creations can powerfully contribute to the church's witness, while effecting the sanctification of the church as she serves. In this sense, the church should be involved in service projects and ministries that require sacrifice and better those around them.

These specific spiritual formation practices can not only develop a congregation's aesthetic sensibilities, but also intentionally bring people into contact with aesthetic experiences. So, while individual Christians need God's Spirit within them, and God's Word in front of them to interpret and appreciate the beauty around them, they also need

²⁹ William Dyrness noted that he regularly visits the website for the Calvin Institute of Christian worship, which has many examples of the good use of the arts for intentional use of beauty and aesthetics in worship gatherings.

³⁰ Titus 2:10

the church to lead them in intentionally cultivating their aesthetic sensibilities. As noted throughout this thesis-project, appealing to aesthetic experiences has a powerful impact on Spiritual transformation. As the body of Christ, we are the embodiment of the divine life in the world. Therefore, the spiritual practices that integrate beauty and aesthetics are beneficial for spiritual formation in the life of a congregation.

In moving forward, it is important that one assess their understanding of the importance of beauty and aesthetics in spiritual formation, as well as the overall aesthetic health of the congregation that one is a part of. For this purpose, an audit instrument for the purpose of aiding Christian leaders and churches in assessing their understanding and intentional use of beauty and aesthetics for the spiritual formation of their congregations in preaching, education, worship, and service. The audit instrument was designed using a modified Likert Scale to identify the intentionally given to the subjects of beauty and aesthetics in spiritual formation by examining the frequency of use concerning the particular practices related to these subjects. Once the assessment is complete, one can evaluate opportunities for strengthening the use of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation practices.

A Word to Seminary Professors

How should seminary professors approach the question “what is going on?” Based on the premise of this study, it stands to reason that pastors are rarely trained in the receptive and formative roles of beauty and aesthetics as it relates to spiritual formation.³¹ As demonstrated in the first chapter, beauty and aesthetics have been greatly neglected

³¹ In a sense, Catholic theologians have been carrying the weight of this task in modern times. Consider Thomas Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty: Science and Theology Meet* (Fort Collins: Ignatius Press, 1999); Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*; and John Navone’s powerful works *Toward a Theology of Beauty*; and *Enjoying God’s Beauty* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999).

among theological studies and ecclesiological application.³² The fact that the majority of the thought leaders leading the advance of beauty and aesthetics in the church had little to no formation training in these areas is telling. Why this going on? Through there is a rich history of Christian thought on these subject, recently beauty and aesthetics have been displaced as essential in the training of our pastors, and the implication is the same for the holistic spiritual formation of congregations.³³ Most of the reflection and writing on the subjects of beauty and aesthetics remain cornered by trained specialists in the theology and philosophy, namely in the specialized field of aesthetics.³⁴ This is seen most clearly in that Christian theologians neglect the subjects of beauty and aesthetics just as much as their philosophical counterparts. Indeed, many theological works used to train church leaders have largely neglected inquiry into these truths.³⁵ If beauty and aesthetics are mentioned at all in the curricula of pastoral training, it is minimal.

However, Christian theologians in the Protestant tradition must affirm the revelation of God's beauty as an act of intentional self-revealing love. The knowledge of, and ultimately communion with, the beautiful God of the Bible is the teleological purpose of divine revelation. Therefore, the foundational theological assertion concerning the subjects of beauty and aesthetics is that God is the origin of beauty and is also most beautiful himself. God is the object of study precisely because he is its self-revealing beautiful subject; therefore he alone is the source and substance of true beauty.³⁶ These truths have implications on the study of both general and special revelation. Historically

³² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Word and Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 162ff.

³³ For a survey on the breath of the thought published in these areas, see Gesa Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).

³⁴ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 15.

³⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 18.

³⁶ John 3:27; 1 Cor. 2:9-11b; Mark 10:18; and Ps. 62:6, 8

Christians have held that God reveals aesthetic truth and beauty through general revelation including nature, culture, human reason, and good deeds. As for special revelation, the foundation for the Christian faith is God's Word, namely the Christian canon of Scripture. Therefore, the Bible provides clarity into the meaning or purpose of beauty and aesthetic experience. Not only is the Bible necessary to define and explain the beauty of general revelation; the aesthetic nature of Scripture also enriches one's understanding of beauty. The Bible as a book is undergirded by its own aesthetic manifestation. One has to inquire, why is there a neglect of these studies if they are so readily addressed in the Scriptures and in the experiences of everyday life? As argued earlier, if the "... aesthetic life is malfunctioning or undeveloped ... then that human life missed a notch, has bare spots, or possibly suffers deformity."³⁷ Therefore, beauty and aesthetics must be addressed in the curricula used to train local church pastors.

This causes one to ask, what ought to be going on? As stated above, pastors ought to be trained in the receptive and formative roles of beauty and aesthetics as it relates to spiritual formation. First, local pastors most likely already understand that ascetic dualism can have a negative effect on spiritual formation practices. But, do pastors have a vision of beauty and aesthetics, as it relates to spiritual formation? A proper understanding of these subjects would pastors and their congregations to properly discern and understand the God intended purpose for sensory pleasures in the beauty of creation and in the arts.³⁸

Second, pastors most likely have a proper fear of idolatry and its effect on spiritual formation practices. However, do pastors have a God-centered vision of beauty displaces idolatry and positions aesthetics as a signpost for worship? Third, do pastors understand that the divorce of the transcendentals has negatively affected the spiritual

³⁷ Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World*, 50.

³⁸ A helpful academic treatment on the role of aesthetics in the Christian life is Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

formation practices of the church? Wouldn't recapturing a balanced view of the transcendentals aids to a rounded vision for the Christian life, and thus a holistic vision for spiritual formation practices? Most thoughtful Christians would agree that without beauty, many of the practices related to spiritual formation could end up being practices of empty morality or mere religious duty. In this sense, Christians cannot come to holistically appreciate truth and goodness unless they are both perceived as beautiful. Therefore, beauty must be seen as clarifying the double focus of theology on truth and goodness. Without beauty the good loses its attractiveness and truth loses its persuasiveness.

Fourth, many pastors rightly bemoan the rise of utilitarianism in the modern world. However, do local church pastors understand the effect utilitarianisms hold on modern thought at it relates to beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation practices? Pastors need to understand that allowing creativity to flourish and seeking aesthetic sensitivity can draw their congregations into a more holistic sphere of life and spirituality. Again, understanding the relationship between beauty, aesthetics, and spiritual formation would aid Christians in seeing the purpose and benefit of beauty in everyday life.

Last, a hesitation toward natural theology and general revelation exists among theologians.³⁹ Do pastors understand how this hesitation has affected the spiritual formation practices of the church as they relate to beauty and aesthetics? From personal experience, Christians will affirm the truth that beauty in God's creation and man's artistic endeavors can evoke a tangible longing for something beyond the immediate life on earth. Are pastors prepared to harness these experiences to direct the Godward spiritual formation practices of the church?

Therefore, seminary professors must ask how they might respond if a proper theological framework for understanding beauty is essential for the use of beauty and

³⁹ T. M. Moore has contributed to recapturing the power of beauty in the natural world with his work, *Consider the Lilies* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2005). Also very helpful in this area is: Edwards, *Creation's Beauty as Revelation*.

aesthetics in spiritual formation. As argued in the previous chapters from a well-grounded theological perspective, beauty provides glimpses of the transcendence of God, not only making one aware of Him, but also prompting their aesthetic longings toward Him. Moreover, God's beauty provides humanity grounds for endless aesthetic exploration and delight.⁴⁰ In this sense, the church not only experiences the beauty of God through spiritual formation practices such as preaching, education, worship, and service, but they also reflect that beauty through these spiritual formation practices to the watching world. It has been said, "Sound theology leads always to the love of beauty. When there is no love of beauty . . . there is no sound theology."⁴¹ This theological perspective on beauty and aesthetics necessitates that it is not so much an option as it is a necessity for the spiritual formation of the church.

At Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, this question has been addressed with the efforts of the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture.⁴² One way the center has engaged the integration of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation is by hosting events like "The Sound of Freedom: The Music of Liberation" with Begbie.⁴³ During this event, Begbie demonstrated that the emotive power of music through various visual aids, piano demonstrations, and other means to supplement certain theological realities in the service of Christian truth and experience. Bruce Little, the director of the Center for Faith and Culture, regularly teaches a course at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary on

⁴⁰ In order to orient oneself with the possibilities of theological exploration in the fields of beauty and aesthetics, this writer would recommend that professors become acquainted with works written by theologians that begin to synthesize these subjects. On an academic level, several authors come to mind: Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*; Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World*; Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996, and Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* are good places to start.

⁴¹ Douglas Jones and Douglas Wilson, *Angels in the Architecture* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1998), 24.

⁴² Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, R. L. Bush Center for Faith and Culture, accessed September 18, 2016, <http://www.sebts.edu/faithandculture/>.

⁴³ This event was held on February 11, 2011.

the Christian faith and the arts, where students consider visual art, architecture, literature, music, and film as important aspects of spiritual formation and worldview.

Fuller Theological Seminary is another example of integrating these ideas into the curriculum for training pastors and church leaders. Not only does Fuller Seminary offer a master's degree in the arts and theology, part of this program enables students to interact with artists, enjoy student films, publish in their creative arts journal, and put on a festival of the arts and gallery exhibitions. Fuller Seminary is the home of the Brehm Center, led by director and artist Makoto Fujimura, which guides and resources Christian leaders to integrate theology, worship, and the arts in a creative manner.⁴⁴ Following these examples, it would serve seminary students well if beauty and aesthetical formation were integrated into the overall curriculum of the school. One way to accomplish this is to offer degrees and certificate programs in the arts, while also making aesthetic competency an aspect of various degree programs. In some cases, this will require that the seminary faculty is trained and educated in the pedagogical use of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation.

If the seminary has not developed a course or center for the exploration of these studies, consider how one might integrate these subjects in the existing curriculum of a seminary education. Professors of church history or historical theology could consider including readings and discussion in the place of beauty and aesthetics in the Christian life from Saint Augustine, Saint Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards, and Hans Urs Von Balthasar.⁴⁵ Professors of systematic theology could consider the place discussions on beauty and aesthetics in the doctrines of revelation, God, man, and eschatology.

⁴⁴ Brehm Center for Worship, Theology, and the Arts, Fuller Theological Seminary, "About," accessed September 18, 2016, <http://www.brehmcenter.com/about>.

⁴⁵ Introductions to these seminal theologians' thoughts on the subject are available in several books: Eco, *Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*; Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility* is helpful; and finally, Nichols, *Key to Balthasar*, is an excellent introductory treatment on Balthasar's work related to the subject.

Professors of biblical spirituality and Christian education could consider the role of beauty and aesthetics in the holistic formation of Christian individuals and entire congregations.⁴⁶ Professors of Christian worship could consider the use of beauty and aesthetics in the worship practices use of arts in the church.⁴⁷ Professors of Christian ethics could include teachings on the apologetic and formative power of the aesthetic life.⁴⁸ In this sense, the options for implementing a strategy to introduce and train pastors in the role of beauty and aesthetics for spiritual formation are vast.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Once again, the thesis examined in this work is that spiritual practices which integrate beauty and aesthetics are beneficial for spiritual formation in the life of a Protestant evangelical congregation. This study has shown the historical precedent for, the theological framework for, and practical examples of integrating beauty and aesthetics into practices related to the spiritual formation of Protestant evangelical congregations. Reader, how then will one encourage and apply these truths in the spiritual formation practices of students, congregations, and in the lives of fellow Christians?

In many ways, this thesis-project has attempted to provide a way forward in developing a practical theology of beauty and aesthetics as they relate to spiritual formation. One of the observations noted earlier is that discussions on beauty and aesthetics have primarily been relegated to specialists in theology and philosophy. However, beauty is an undeniable reality to all of humanity. Therefore, the practice of

⁴⁶ The most helpful resource in this area is McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality*.

⁴⁷ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, is helpful in exploring the intersection of art, theology, and worship.

⁴⁸ Wooddell, *Beauty of the Faith*, is the best treatment on the subject in recent publication.

⁴⁹ Leland Ryken has edited an excellent volume that covers the vast terrain of beauty, aesthetics, art, and their intersection with the Christian life: *The Christian Imagination*. Also see Gaebelein, *Christian, the Arts and Truth*.

aesthetics is important, especially for Christians who seek to enjoy and flourish in God's world. There is much work to do in the areas of beauty and aesthetics for the church, especially in the realm of practical theology as it relates to spiritual formation. Though beauty and the aesthetic experience is part of human existence, few have explored these realities in relation to spiritual formation from a Christian perspective. May this be one of many projects that seek to meet that need. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

APPENDIX A
ASSESSING THE AESTHETIC HEALTH
OF A CONGREGATION

- 1. Beauty and aesthetic experience has a powerful role in the spiritual formation of a Christian from a cognitive, affective, and volitional level.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 2. The imagination and recall of sensory experience of the congregation is regularly engaging through the use of paintings, music, drama, literature, film, nature, and photography.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 3. The preacher often uses aesthetically adorned language or poetry to illuminate the text, or emotionally moving and imaginative illustrations to draw on the senses of the congregation.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 4. In preaching, visual imagery and other means of aesthetic experience, like drama, music, and artistic images (pictures and paintings), are used to support the congregation's understanding of the biblical passage.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 5. In education, the congregation is intentionally engaged with aesthetic sensory experience for their rational and emotional formation.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 6. The church's aesthetic awareness and understanding is integrated in education through interaction with the arts (both visual and auditory) and experiences in the natural world.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 7. In worship environments and experiences, the congregation is widely exposed to aesthetic experiences and expressions through the arts.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 8. In worship, the liturgy or pattern of the service utilizes different types of songs (hymns, choruses, or mixed variety), and aesthetic elements to symbolize and evoke a variety of emotions and responses from the congregation for their spiritual formation—whether they be celebrative or somber.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 9. The congregation is often called to live in a manner that will adorn the teaching of the Lord in beautiful and attractive ways before one another and unbelievers by use of exhortation or moving illustrations depicting an aesthetic life of Christian service.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

- 10. Creativity is encouraged to flourish in ways of service, and in the exhibition and creation of art for the good of the church and the community at-large.**

Never
Rarely
Occasionally
A moderate amount
A great deal

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSE DATES

The questionnaire was sent to the following participants on December 3, 2015:

Scott Aniol (Ph.D., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary), questionnaire returned on December 20, 2015.

Kevin T. Bauder (Ph.D., Dallas Theological Seminary), questionnaire returned on December 3, 2015.

Jeremy Begbie (Ph.D., University of Aberdeen), questionnaire returned on December 4, 2015.

William Dyrness (D.Théol., University of Strasbourg), questionnaire returned on December 6, 2015.

Dan Forrest (D.M.A, University of Kansas), questionnaire returned on January 6, 2016.

Makoto Fujimura (B.A., Bucknell University), questionnaire returned on December 7, 2015.

Scott Horrell (Th.D., Dallas Theological Seminary), questionnaire returned on December 3, 2015.

Bruce A. Little (Ph.D., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, questionnaire returned on December 4, 2015.

Mark Ryan (MATS, Covenant Theological Seminary; M.Div., Trinity Theological Seminary/University of Liverpool), questionnaire returned on December 15, 2015.

Gesa Thiessen (Ph.D., Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy), questionnaire returned on December 4, 2015.

Jay Wegter (M.Div., The Masters Seminary), questionnaire returned on December 3, 2015.

Joseph Wooddell (Ph.D., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary), questionnaire returned on December 9, 2015.

Brian Zahnd, questionnaire returned on December 3, 2015.

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VITA

Matthew Z. Capps was born on December 3, 1981, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Since June of 2015, Matt Capps has served as the Senior Pastor of Fairview Baptist Church in Apex, North Carolina. Matt earned his Bachelor of Arts in the arts from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, an M.Div. with Biblical Languages at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a D.Min. in Pastoral Theology and Practice at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (expected 2017). Prior to serving at Fairview Baptist Church, Matt served as one of the pastors at Calvary Baptist Church (Winston-Salem, North Carolina), the brand manager for the Gospel Project at LifeWay Christian Resources, and a teaching pastor at The Fellowship (Nashville, Tennessee). Matt has written one book, *Hebrews: A 12-Week Study* (Crossway, 2015), and various articles for websites, such as The Gospel Coalition, Gospel-centered Discipleship, The Gospel Project, Facts and Trends, Together for Adoption, Pastors Today, Church Leaders, and For the Church. Matt and his wife Laura have three children, Solomon, Ruby, and Abby.